

# ***JUMP CUT***

**A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA**

*Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*

Issue 51

Spring 2009

Source: [ejumpcut.org](http://ejumpcut.org)

*Jump Cut* was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in 1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

This electronic version was created with the approval of the *Jump Cut* editors and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Classic issues from the past now online

Be sure to visit our [Classic issues from the past](#). All back issues are now online. Click here for [text only version](#) of no. 51 contents, suitable for printing.

No. 51, spring 2009

### Documenting torture

#### [Imagining torture](#)

by Chuck Kleinhans

Survey of the fundamental political facts of torture in the present moment in U.S. history and a brief introduction to the visual imagination of torture in fiction film and television.

#### [Torture documentaries](#)

by Julia Lesage

With a close analysis of *Taxi to the Dark Side*, *Standard Operating Procedure*, and *The Road to Guantanamo*, Lesage analyzes the torture documentary in terms of genre structures, torture epistophilia, and affect.

#### [A Simple Case for Torture, redux](#)

by Martha Rosler

Rosler reconsiders her 1983 experimental video, *A Simple Case for Torture* in the context of torture in the George W. Bush presidency.

### Television

#### [The Wire and the world: narrative and metanarrative](#)

by Helena Sheehan and Sheamus Sweeney

Does *The Wire* deserve the critical acclaim it has attracted? The key to this question lies in an examination of how its specific plots open into a systemic critique of the social order encompassing it all.

#### [“Don’t Just Watch It, Live It:” technology, corporate partnerships, and The Hills](#)

by Elizabeth Affuso

This essay examines how MTV’s *The Hills* uses new media technologies and corporate partnerships to create and expand the show’s aspirational lifestyle brand.

#### [Postmodern marketing, Generation Y and the multiplatform viewing experience of MTV’s The Hills](#)

by Amanda Klein

*The Hills* offers content in alternate venues, including tabloid magazines, MTV-sponsored virtual worlds, gossip sites, blogs and product tie-ins. This multiplatform marketing strategy engages its target audience, Generation Y, a demographic adept and dependent on social networking tools and comfortable with the concept of surveillance and public disclosure.

#### [The past isn't what it used to be: the troubled homes of Mad Men](#)

by Mark Taylor

How *Mad Men*'s sixties nostalgia recycles and revises our image of the past.

#### [Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica](#)

reviewed by David Greven

A new essay collection praises the current version of *Battlestar Galactica* for its gritty complexity. But is there something ideologically suspect in this “complexity”?



## [Global formats, gender and identity: the search for \*The Perfect Bride\* on Italian television](#)

by Michela Ardizzoni

Does reality television challenge traditional gender norms and expectations? Or, is the new packaging of television programming a camouflage for conservative views on gender roles? The case of the Italian 'Perfect Bride' reveals the tensions between format novelty and ideological regression.

## East Asian film

### [A nightmare of capitalist Japan: \*Spirited Away\*](#)

by Ayumi Suzuki

Hayao Miyazaki uses animation and children as characters to question conditions in post-modern Japan by depicting a late-capitalist society that faces issues such as the loss of spiritual values and identity.

### [The curious cases of Salma, Siti, and Ming: representations of Indonesia's polygamous life in \*Love for Share\*](#)

by Ekky Imanjaya

A domestic comedy exploring the polygamous lifestyle and depicting the mostly unacknowledged aspects of polygamy in the country with the largest percentage of Muslims.

### [Gender and class in the Singaporean film \*881\*](#)

by Brenda Chan

This essay examines how Singaporean director, Royston Tan, challenges gender, linguistic and class hierarchies in his 2007 film *881*.

### [Cinenumorology: interview with Royston Tan, one of Singapore's most versatile filmmakers](#)

by Anne Ciecko

Dynamic Singaporean filmmaker Royston Tan speaks with Anne Ciecko about cultural identity and language, film festivals and box-office success, actors and singers, melodrama and spectacle, and chicken jokes and bullet bras.

### [Visible "waves": notes on Koreanness, pan-Asianness, and some recent Southeast Asian art films](#)

by Anne Ciecko and Hunju Lee

The impact of the Korean cultural "wave" and pan-Asian cinematic trends are visible in recent films by Singapore's Royston Tan and Thailand's Pen-ek Ratanaruang.

### [Asia's beloved sassy girl: Jun Ji-Hyun's star image and her transnational stardom](#)

by JaeYoon Park

Jun Ji-Hyun became one of the Korean Wave stars in Asia through her "sassy" girl image that reversed gender expectations. Does her image signify a new subversive female type in Asia?

## Porn

### [Pornography and its critical reception: toward a theory of masturbation](#)

by Magnus Ullén

The cultural centrality of pornography will become evident only if we pay attention not only to the contents of porn, but to the masturbatory mode of reading it habitually involves as well.

### [Real sex: the aesthetics and economics of art-house porn](#)

by Jon Lewis

This essay examines art-house porn, a genre defined by a market niche and a set of shared aesthetic principles that introduce a peculiar but nonetheless sincere cinematic realism.

### [Documentary and the anamnesis of queer space: \*The Polymath, or, The Life and Opinions of Samuel R. Delany, Gentleman\*](#)

by Nicholas de Villiers

Fred Barney Taylor's recent documentary portrait of the writer Samuel R. Delany intervenes in debates about New York City's changing queer sexual landscape, combatting cultural amnesia alongside the activist video *Fenced Out* and the documentary *Gay Sex in the 70s*.

### [Documentary investigations and the female porn star](#)

by Belinda Smaill

Analyzes representations of the female porn star, subjectivity, and the question of desire in documentaries about the pornography industry, and considers these depictions of the women in terms of genre expectations, economy of emotions, and popular narratives of femininity.

### [\*The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene\*](#)

reviewed by Catherine Clepper

The Asian/American female body serves as a site of desire, danger, or virtue — and sometimes all three.

### [Documenting and denial: discourses of sexual self-exploitation](#)

by Leigh Goldstein

In their analyses of the adolescent social practice of producing and sharing eroticized images, media and legal discourses contribute to a social construction of childhood innocence that puts kids at risk.

## Hollywood

### [\*Milk\* and gay political history](#)

by Harry Benshoff

Academy Award winning actor Sean Penn makes political organizing look joyous.

### [\*Children of Men\* and \*I Am Legend\*: the disaster-capitalism complex hits Hollywood](#)

by Kirk Boyle

The formally similar post-apocalyptic films *Children of Men* and *I Am Legend* respond in diametrically opposed ways to the neoconservative movement's mix of imperial foreign policy with religious and market fundamentalism.

### [The exceptional darkness of \*The Dark Knight\*](#)

by Todd McGowan

*The Dark Knight* explores the danger and the necessity of the state of exception for contemporary politics.

### [\*The Dark Knight\* of American empire](#)

by Randolph Lewis

Along with its teenage fantasy of bulging biceps and smoke-belching cars, does the new Batman invite a second fantasy of rupture and revolution? Using the insights of philosopher Ernst Bloch, this essay argues for a radical interpretation of a Hollywood blockbuster released at the end of the Bush administration.

### [Post-Iraq cinema: the veteran hero in \*The Jacket\* and \*Harsh Times\*](#)

by Justin Vicari

John Maybury's *The Jacket* (2005) and David Ayer's *Harsh Times* (2007) explore in very different ways the difficulties faced by Iraq war veterans in civilian U.S. society, though both films reach the same conclusion: the problems of veterans are all of our problems.

### [\*WALL-E\*: from environmental adaptation to sentimental nostalgia](#)

by Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann In *WALL-E*,

A robot built for clean-up named WALL-E helps transform the hell of Earth into a home by following a narrative of environmental adaptation with a clear and cohesive structure that follows an evolutionary pattern focused on place.

### [Clint Eastwood's \*Gran Torino\*: the death of America's hero](#)

by Robert Alpert

Clint Eastwood, at 78, elegiacally acknowledges the failure of the myth of the invincible loner.

### [Interpreting revolution: \*Che: Part I\* and \*Part II\*](#)

by Victor Wallis

The dialectic of victory and defeat in the life of Che Guevara — and what it means today.

## Art films, international cinema

## [The cold world behind the window: 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days and Romanian cinema's return to real-existing communism](#)

by Constantin Parvulescu

How a generation of filmmakers rethinks the cinematic representation of the past.

## [Retrieving Emir Kusturica's \*Underground\* as a critique of ethnic nationalism](#)

by Sean Homer

Is it possible to read Kusturica's *Underground* "against the grain" today, as a critique of ethnonationalism, or has Kusturica's more recent and very publicly expressed nationalist leanings now irretrievably marked this text for us?

## [Dimensions of exile in the videos of Silvia Malagrino](#)

by Ilene S. Goldman

Video artist Malagrino traces her memories of Argentina and of friends murdered there in works that focus on the embodiment of fear, violence, war, and memory.

## [No parking between signs: on Sadie Benning's \*Flat is Beautiful\* and early works](#)

by Burlin Barr

Benning's videos render the private material and conceptual spaces of an adolescent youth, and offer a compelling depiction of an emergent subject: someone attempting to come to terms with him/herself in a world of racial, class, and sexual prescriptions and prohibitions.

## [Sex versus the small screen: home video censorship and Alfonso Cuarón's \*Y tu mamá también\*](#)

by Caetlin Benson-Allott

In order to protect its member studios and satisfy the market demands of conservative video retailers, the MPAA abuses its ratings system, compelling "foreign" films like *Y tu mamá también* to obfuscate political critique by cutting scenes crucial to the movie.

## [Torture, maternity, and truth in Jasmila Zbanic's \*Grbavica: Land of My Dreams\*](#)

by Caroline Koebel

Set in Sarajevo a decade after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this understated domestic melodrama dramatizes a mother's memories and a daughter's needs.

# Horror

## [Culture wars: some new trends in art horror](#)

by Joan Hawkins

New trends in art-horror—and the way they're received by critics, the subgenre of guilt-trauma horror films, and the mainstreaming of trash culture.

## [Misogyny as radical commentary: \*Rashomon\* retold in Takashi Miike's \*Masters of Horror: Imprint\*](#)

by William Leung

Not just a cheap thrill dressed up as a class act, *Imprint* is a radical Japanese filmmaker's visceral commentary on Western audiences' reverence for Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece, *Rashomon*.

## [The dangers of biosecurity: \*The Host\* and the geopolitics of outbreak](#)

by Hsuan L. Hsu

Analyzes the South Korean blockbuster monster movie as a narrative about disease, hunger, and the IMF.

## [The return of horror to Chinese cinema: an aesthetic of restraint and space of horror](#)

by Li Zeng

After a four-decade absence, horror returns to the PRC cinema. This essay studies the theme and style of contemporary Chinese horror films in relation to international horrors and Chinese social and cultural context.

## [Cross cultural disgust: some problems in the analysis of contemporary horror cinema](#)

by Chuck Kleinhans

The increased market in the West for "Asian Extreme" horror cinema dramatizes the problems of cross cultural (mis)understanding and analysis.

# Media salad

## [Media salad](#)

by Chuck Kleinhans

# Book reviews

## [Center Field Shot: A History of Baseball on Television](#)

reviewed by Deborah Tudor

*Center Field Shot* provides a meticulous survey of the twinned economic fortunes of media and baseball.

## [Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance](#)

reviewed by Neha Kamdar

Mutation of music and the cultural reinvention of Bollywood across the world.

## [From “centripetal” to “centrifugal” trauma: history and representation in modern China](#)

by Li Zeng

Review of *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* by Michael Berry (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)

## [Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound](#)

reviewed by Mark Kerins

The individual essays in *Lowering the Boom* are a mixed bag, but several standout pieces and the book's breadth of topics make it a great resource for film scholars whether specifically interested in sound or not.

# The last word

## [Racing into the Obama era](#)

by the editors

## [Remembrance against manufactured amnesia: on the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Incident](#)

by David Leiwei Li

History since the Tiananmen incident makes clear the convergence of state and capital interests for the sake of a forever-profitable economy.

---

[To top](#)

[Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### Imagining torture

by Chuck Kleinhans

Most of us don't know torture, either as victim or perpetrator. We haven't experienced it. We can only imagine it. We imagine it in terms of extreme pain we have felt, the feeling of panic and loss, violation of our body, perhaps in an accident or illness. But even then we don't have the experience of being a prisoner, of being totally helpless. Therefore we have to imagine torture from descriptive sources such as news or, more likely, from fictions, particularly its representation in popular film and on TV.

In this essay I want to survey the fundamental political facts of torture in the present moment in U.S. history and then provide a brief introduction to the visual imagination of torture in moving image media. Other articles in this issue of *Jump Cut* also discuss torture: Julia Lesage's analyses of recent documentaries on U.S. CIA and military torture of prisoners taken in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Martha Rosler's reconsideration of her pioneering video, *A Simple Case for Torture*. But the fundamental issues also cross over into the sections in this issue on porn and on horror. The human body, on display, in extreme sensory states, in danger, in degradation, in humiliation: these conditions overlap, as with a Venn diagram overlapping sex, horror, and violence. Considering these connections in a fast-changing current political and media moment is an urgent task now and in the near future.

### One: torture and the national imagination

As the United States moved to the November 2008 Presidential election, other issues took the lead: the national domestic economy; the financial sector meltdown; the increasing housing crisis; the high cost of transportation, energy, healthcare, and food; the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and so forth. In that frame, torture was not a front burner issue. As the election season narrowed the range of topics in public discussion and concentrated attention on individual candidates rather than offered any systematic analysis, torture appeared to disappear as an issue. But, we would argue, it is also deeply present in U.S. life and also deeply repressed. America is in denial about torture. First, it is a troubling topic. Deaths in combat are an uncomfortable topic, but understandable. Soldiers become

casualties and kill others — combatants and civilians.

But torture suddenly became one of the central issues in the Obama era, in part because of how the President chose to play out the choices: close Guantanamo; do not prosecute CIA agents involved in torture; do not pursue the war crimes of the previous administration; continue the imprisonment by moving prisoners to other sites; restore military tribunals. At the same time, those who want to hold the Bush-Cheney administration responsible have found a fulcrum point in the torture issue. Even more invitingly, Dick Cheney has become increasingly defensive and open, calling for release of classified documents to “prove” torture was effective and thus that he was right. Even the normally circumspect Condoleezza Rice has made public defenses of her past actions. And the right wing media amplifiers have blustered on, with TV talk show host Sean Hannity even offering to be waterboarded to prove it wasn’t really torture, and then chickening out when challenged to do so.

Torture in custody always involves premeditation and planning. It is hard to talk about, to recognize, to face up to. The examples that come forward, such as the Abu Ghraib photos, or reports that the United States took children as hostages and terrorized them to get information about the whereabouts of their father, are disturbing. But we would argue that issue is really always present but repressed. The trace of denial can be seen in media representations, and covers not only documentaries, but also dramatic feature films about the war, and entertainment films and TV shows that touch on the subject.

Torture is part of the contemporary national imagination. In summer 2007 U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, at a Canadian meeting of international jurists, indicated he was a big fan of the TV drama 24.

"'Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles. ... He saved hundreds of thousands of lives,' Judge Scalia said. Then, recalling Season 2, where the agent's rough interrogation tactics saved California from a terrorist nuke, the Supreme Court judge etched a line in the sand. 'Are you going to convict Jack Bauer?' Judge Scalia challenged his fellow judges. 'Say that criminal law is against him? 'You have the right to a jury trial?' Is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer? I don't think so. ...'"

"During a break from the panel, Judge Scalia specifically mentioned the segment in Season 2 ... 'There's a great scene where he told a guy that he was going to have his family killed,' Judge Scalia said. 'They had it on closed circuit television - and it was all staged. ... They really didn't kill the family.'"[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Following the 9/11 attack, the war in Afghanistan, and the subsequent capture of Al-Qaeda suspects (and more, later in Iraq), the White

House National Security Council's Principals Committee met regularly to advise President Bush on the prisoners (euphemistically called in Bushspeak "detainees," as if they were just being politely asked to wait a little while until another flight). Chaired by then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, the group included Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, CIA director George Tenet, and Attorney General John Ashcroft, or their principal deputies. They discussed and approved specific details of how Al-Qaeda prisoners would be interrogated. They approved combining techniques including slapping, pushing, slamming heads into walls, sleep deprivation, stress positions, loud music, and waterboarding.

"The high-level discussions about these 'enhanced interrogation techniques' were so detailed, these sources said, some of the interrogation sessions were almost choreographed—down to the number of times CIA agents could use a specific tactic." [2]

Further reports indicated that CIA agents came in and demonstrated the techniques so the principals could be clear about what they were. [3] This White House performance art, a torture by proxy, reveals a lot about the psychology of the President's top advisors. Even if you haven't read Freud's essay, "A Child is Being Beaten," which describes the psychology, the mix of fear and fascination, that grips a child who knows another kid, out of sight, is being spanked, you can sense what is going on. Under the excuse, the alibi, the guise of careful procedural administration, this group is on a power trip, vicariously participating in the torture of another human being, getting back for the humiliation of the 9/11 events.

The argument that the U.S. is "soft" due to the institutions of democracy is a commonplace idea among neocons and fundamentalist evangelicals. Therefore by acting tough, by asserting (unilateral) power on the world stage or in a specific confrontation with a "terrorist" one overthrows this softness. Significantly then, almost all of major players in the White House Iraq policy and torture rehearsal meetings were people without military service, people who would be the most likely to feel the need to assert their "hardness," to prove their masculinity (or to appear sufficiently masculine to get to play with the boys) rather than just assuming it as part of their personal attributes, experience, and history.

In the popular imagination, in the administration's official justification for it, using torture is a "lesser evil" or lesser danger. The end (national security; to save the United States) justifies the means (using torture). Of course the common response to this argument is that in using those means you have corrupted yourself and compromised the end. You have committed a war crime.

In the classic case, it is phrased as: if there is a ticking bomb that could kill many people and one captured person knows where it is, it is

justified to torture that individual for information in order to save the multitude. There are some precise problems with the ticking bomb thesis. First of all, it has never happened in the real world, nor does it seem likely to happen. But it is a very common dramatic narrative device in fiction. For example the Internet Movie Database lists over 4,650 film titles that use the narrative trope of “race against the clock.” This large number includes films such as *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998) and also bomb-specific ones such as *Face/Off* (John Woo, 1997). The trope provides a clear narrative arc into which dramatic delays and set backs function to increase suspense and anticipation. So the “ticking bomb” type of plot remains active in the popular imagination, even though it is not realistic in a police or military policy sense.

How efficient is torture as a policy and practice? It has at least four functions: 1) to gain information, 2) to obtain a confession of guilt, 3) to function as punishment for the victim, and 4) to gratify the torturer.

It does work to extract confessions of guilt, since eventually the victim will usually confess anything to make the pain stop. We could call this the Spanish Inquisition model after one of the most famous torture regimes. But we also know that some U.S. police departments have used (or tolerated) torture to attain confessions. The origins of the torture protocols at Guantanamo, Bagram, and CIA “black sites” are revealing. The CIA and civilian, military interrogators were faced with clear and continuous pressure from the highest levels of the administration (particularly Cheney) to “get more information” from interrogation (largely it seems, evidence of Iraqi WMDs and ties to al-Qaeda to cover up the flimsy excuses offered for invasion). There were some experts available in the FBI (which works within the legal system), the military Criminal Investigation Divisions (also within the law) and military lawyers, and intelligence gathering specialists in the CIA who were familiar with the well known and recognized methods of legal and effective interrogation. But they were ignored or shunted aside. The actual effective and legal science of interrogation was replaced with a fantasy largely derived, it seems, from 80s and 90s action films that pitted Harrison Ford or Bruce Willis or Tom Cruise or Steven Segal against generic “terrorists”: from the IRA, Libya, the Middle East in general, criminal blackmailers, drug cartel leaders, rogue former CIA outfits, and (after 1989) the former Soviet Union (with contraband nukes).

In this juvenile fantasy, the deft application of extreme force to a human villain (often as a part of hand to hand combat in the climax) reveals the location of the ticking bomb and allows it to be neutralized. But since real world detainees have to be interrogated in a considerably less spectacular way than the norm for Hollywood action films, the Good Guys have to have a method to gain information. What actually happened was that they adapted the scenario of the military’s SERE (Survive, Evade, Resist, Escape) training for individuals likely to be captured in combat operations. SERE was a response to the shocking false “confessions” that U.S. captured personnel (largely



pilots, that is military academy trained officers) made during the Korean War such as “germ warfare.” The North Korean and Chinese interrogators applied methods to obtain false confessions (not military secrets) which were simply intended for propaganda effects. In response to public and Congressional alarm at how easily U.S. military personnel were “brainwashed,” the armed forces established rigorous training to help potential prisoners by giving them a theatrical rehearsal of the techniques commonly used, including waterboarding. This training was aimed at giving people some personal dignity and integrity when faced with almost certainly effective torture techniques aimed at getting false confessions.

The North Korean torture techniques did not produce truthful confessions (and were not intended to do so by the captors). However they effectively produced false confessions intended for propaganda purposes, and they were quite effective at so doing. Adapted by the SERE schools, the techniques were used to train potential combatants how best to deal with torture. In turn, transformed into “terrorist” interrogation tools, the tools and techniques were palpably wrong for the purpose of gathering good intelligence. However they were perfect for inducing false confessions. But why would US interrogators want false confessions? It is now evident that from the top down, primarily from the Vice President’s office, the need was for false information that could be used to establish an Al Qaeda connection to Saddam Hussein. The centerpiece of Colin Powell’s UN speech laying out the case for war with Iraq was extensive reference to a high level captured terrorist who had told of Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction and connections with Al Qaeda. Both were fictions; both were pure propaganda. The torture techniques produced the desired end: false information used to promote Bush-Cheney war plans.

As adapted by CIA, private contractor, and military agents who were ignorant of the actual science of interrogation, the SERE methods and scenarios (which were war crimes) were applied to gain intelligence information. It’s hard to imagine a bigger fiasco. In the ongoing postmortem, as more classified documents are revealed, it is clear that good information was obtained relatively quickly by traditional legal means. When untrained interrogation using abusive torture commenced, the amount, kind, and quality of the intelligence plummeted. The solution was to ramp up the pain. It always worked in the movies.

Some facts of torture can be established as incontrovertibly true:

1. Who tortures?

Basic social psychological research, notably by Dr. Stanley Milgram in the 1960s, concluded that about 70% of ordinary people would torture (administer high levels of pain to a complaining subject) if directed by persons they don’t know who seem to have legitimate authority. Milgram concluded that it would probably be much higher if the authority of the government sanctioned it. Thus it is the exceptional

person who refuses to torture, especially under the conditions of military organization.

In 1971 the Stanford prison experiments studied the psychological results of incarceration on both guards and prisoners. The ethically controversial group event was ended when the role-playing subjects quickly exceeded expected behaviors in the mock prison. Many “guards” became actively sadistic; many “prisoners” were traumatized. The results have been used to argue that situation rather than pre-existing disposition shapes behavior. The lead researcher, Phillip Zimbardo, in response to the Abu Ghraib events argued against the “few bad apples” characterization of what happened.

2. It’s simply not true for the United States that “we don’t torture.”

Torture is as American as the colonial New England witch trials which used deliberate drowning (17th century waterboarding) to reveal the Devil’s helpers. The United States has a long history of using torture against some enemy combatants and force, including torture and murder, against civilian populations in a war zone. The history of Native Americans, U.S. intervention and occupation in Central America and the Caribbean, and the colonization of the Philippines provide many examples. Indeed, waterboarding was first developed as a standard interrogation technique against the Philippines resistance to U.S. colonization.[4] In addition, the United States has offered substantial support to regimes and movements that did and do routinely practice torture. The U.S. military School of the Americas brought Latin American military officers to the U.S. for advanced training that included torture techniques. In fact, with the CIA rendition program, the United States outsources torture to other governments.

3. Techniques endorsed by the Bush administration and commonly used which they claim are not torture, are in fact, torture.

Sensory deprivation, reducing sound, sight, feeling (gloves) and sleep deprivation leads to a loss of personal control of self for the individual subjected to it. These techniques leave no identifiable scars or evidence of having been used. Another technique, forced standing, leads to physical breakdown including ulcers on legs, kidney failure, etc. All of these are torture, as commonly defined. In the extraordinarily narrow legal definition developed by the administration, it is not torture if it doesn’t cause organ failure. The key thing here is that the administration separated out each of the individual techniques or elements of torture, stressing those that left no physical evidence, including waterboarding, and then said that no one of them constituted torture. However, the techniques were choreographed, that is, used in concert, simultaneously, and serially, which behavioral and medical experiments prove to be vastly potentiating. That is, they are torture.

For the Right to claim these practices are not torture is astonishingly duplicitous. By the technical standard of “leading to immanent organ failure” (the Yoo memo), the proceedings of the crucifixion of Jesus were not torture until his hands were nailed to the cross. (And technically, this would lead to permanent crippling, not to organ failure per se if the wound were kept sterile.) And perhaps the spear in the abdomen by a Roman guard was torture, though we don’t know if an organ was actually penetrated or it was just that the skin was pierced. And further, in some interpretations of the Christ narrative, the soldier is seen as actually not trying to torment Jesus, but to simply hasten the end—that is, the motivation was mercy for the long-suffering victim. Christian fundamentalists who celebrate Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of Christ* don’t seem to have noticed that the Bush torture doctrine would have excused almost all of Christ’s tormentors.

4. As it developed in prisons like Bagram in Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib in Iraq, and Guantanamo on the island of Cuba, the actual practice of interrogation was two-staged.

First there was a physical and psychological “roughing up” which was intended to “prepare” the prisoners to be ready to talk. Then, a second stage of traditional interrogation began. For the most part, as at Abu Graib, the military guards were routinely assigned to the first stage, and then the interrogators took over. So behind the infamous photos from Abu Ghraib lies the fact that those (often untrained) MPs arrived at a prison with a systematic regime already in place.

5. Torture is not a useful method for intelligence gathering.

Experienced interrogators such as senior FBI agents, military investigation services such as the Navy Criminal Investigation Service, and other intelligence operations such as the Defense Intelligence Agency overwhelmingly conclude that it doesn’t work. The preferred practice for interrogators is to establish a relation with the prisoner, pointing out that the detained have no good options, and that if they cooperate by providing information the questioner can help them: protecting and providing for their family, giving them better prison conditions, etc. During WW2 the German Gestapo quickly found that “revenge” and “collective punishment” for underground resistance activity to military occupation was immensely counterproductive. They found that simply offering rewards produced informants. But using collective punishment and targeted torture immediately functions to shut down local sources of information. This finding is upheld as well by the large database on intelligence and interrogation from the Vietnam War.

The most obvious question is: if it is known rationally, historically, scientifically, and in the embodied experience of successful professional interrogators that torture is ineffective, why would it become policy and practice? Why would you have the smartest people in the Bush administration sitting around dress rehearsing specific

tortures to be used on specific prisoners? The answer can't be that it gets meaningful results. Rather, we have to look at what torture has been demonstrated to do. First, it is effective at intimidation: of the specific prisoner, and of their community. And it has the downside of closing down communication or cooperation with the occupied population. Second, it is effective as punishment. It makes the victim pay a price for whatever was done. But of course this is rough justice, nonjudicial punishment, pain inflicted not after the social/political formality of a trial and as an affirmation of reasoned state interests and power, but just as revenge, meted out by the will of the powerful against the helpless, the hapless, and — without a prior determination of guilt or innocence — against some who are innocent.

\*\*\*\*\*

So why the Principals Group virtual torture meetings? For the interrogator/torturer, for the Grand Inquisitor, and significantly for the person ordering the torture, it makes them feel they are in control: "torture makes the man." They can impose their power on the prisoner. The initial goal is psychological and coercive — to reduce the prisoner's sense of control. But it quickly becomes "I have power and none of you have power." The very mechanism of torture says to the prisoner that he has no control and to the torturer that they have all the power. It is, then, achieving this psychological state that is important.

It has been well established that the Bush administration failed in not paying attention to intelligence warnings before 9/11. Bush, Rice, and Cheney ignored an August report to the President that Osama bin Laden was preparing for an attack in the U.S.. Traditionally gathered CIA intelligence warned of an impending major event. Local FBI investigations that stumbled upon warning signs were ignored higher up. This information was generated in traditional (non-torture) ways. But the 9/11 events demonstrated for the world that the Administration was not in control, was not all-powerful, was not the protector. In response the psychology of establishing and asserting control, the separate need to look omnipotent again, took precedence over most effectively meeting the goals. But in addition to asserting control, the classic, centuries-old, military command model begins with the commander and his staff taking responsibility for a mistake, and then aggressively correcting it. After 9/11 rather than an honest "we blew it," the President and his administration denied that the advance warnings were meaningful and ignored. They did not assess what went wrong, how mistakes were made, and then corrected them so it wouldn't happen again. They hunkered down and lived in denial of what their responsibility had been. But they still wanted/needed to make up for the humiliation they faced.

Thus what was officially denounced as "torture" in the 50s and something that only barbaric totalitarian regimes would employ became legal and Standard Operating Procedure according to the

President and his advisors in the post 9/11 world. After Abu Ghraib, even though U.S. military regulations have gone back to previous definitions of what are acceptable interrogation procedures for prisoners, the CIA has been excepted from such rules, and private contractors who conduct interrogations apparently are free to do whatever they want or think they can get away with. Such exceptionalism is written into the law, with the President defining his power as Commander in Chief as giving him supralegal authority over surveillance, imprisonment, and interrogation. The professional military needs to hold to the standards for prisoners of war set out in the Geneva Conventions and inscribed in the Army's field manual, understanding that these standards protect U.S. personnel captured in combat. When the Administration chose to claim these international standards were obsolete, they created the basis for any and all future enemies likewise to discard those standards.

Working parallel to the standardization of torture techniques on site, the White House had Justice Department lawyers prepare casuistic arguments that what had been recognized as torture was really not torture at all. Key was separating every single item and saying that since it alone did not cause organ failure resulting in death, it was not torture. (A similar argument had been made at the first Rodney King trial. Defense attorneys for the police accused of beating the motorist showed the videotape in slow motion to claim that each individual blow was insignificant. The jury agreed and in the face of explicit documentation, exonerated the cops.) But again and again, when taken to the now archconservative Supreme Court and to lower courts and to military tribunals, the administration and its prosecutors have lost and been reversed. This is a remarkably poor record for the Justice Department and special Rumsfeld-rigged Defense Department lawyers. And as the story has come out about the administration not hiring on merit but rather on party affiliation, on "loyalty," on having been a College Young Republican, rather than a leading law school student, the whole thing has unraveled in terms of justification. What hasn't become undone is the remaining damage to the lives of the prisoners. The scars of their torture, both overt and psychological scars, remain for them and their families. This is the shameful legacy.

[Go to page 2: watching torture](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Two: watching torture

We do know torture, we have witnessed it, again and again: in fictional representations. Fiction provides a security for the viewer: this is make-believe. It's just a movie. And wound into the structure of the action-adventure film, the kinetic charge of fast movement allows the audience to recognize, experience, and quickly move on past the torture event. The edits, the narrative ellipses across a cut or across a scene, allow an event without reflection, sober consideration, attention to the aftermath, or ethics and morality. Heroic action cinema differs from the new forms of exploitation "torture porn" since the latter goes beyond just showing and lingers on pain and suffering.

Here are some key and/or representative moments of torture in films and TV from the past 50 years. Our own ways of imagining torture are framed, in significant ways, by what we watched of torture in dramatic narrative cinema.

#### *Lost Command:* torture to maintain imperial control

A 1966 studio picture, *Lost Command* was directed by Mark Robson based on a novel by French journalist, novelist and former soldier, Jean Lartéguy. The 1963 novel, *The Centurions*, is set in the Algerian war of liberation from French colonialism in the 1950s and is widely credited with being the first example of the "ticking time bomb" plot, which justifies using torture to obtain information that could save lives from a terrorist attack.

An oddly contradictory mix, the film shows the French army's depraved slaughter of unarmed civilians, and depicts (off screen) torture by electrodes and beating as interrogation techniques. Alain Delon plays a French captain who marks the moral center, standing against attacks on civilians. But those lower in the chain of command attack Algerians anyway, in revenge. George Segal improbably (and with dark make-up) plays a soldier released from the French Army after the defeat in Vietnam who returns home and becomes a radical (along with his sister) when their younger brother is shot by the French police for painting "independence" on a wall at night. The film implies that fighting for national liberation is good (not so unusual for a U.S. film given our own colonial history), but using terrorism in the struggle is bad. Torture is also bad, but in the film it works.

The film's central star, Anthony Quinn, plays a French Lt. Colonel who is captured in Vietnam when the French are overrun at Dien Bien Phu (1954) at the start of the film. He re-emerges when sent to Algeria to inspect the colonial situation there. Seeing the massacre of civilians, he proclaims it to be murder, but then uses the example to warn the native population to not protect the liberation fighters. At the end the Delon character leaves Algeria, disillusioned by the French brutality he has witnessed while the scheming pragmatist, Quinn, overcomes the disgrace of his defeat in Vietnam and ascends to the rank of General.



After three French soldiers are killed by FLN rebels, the French troops punish the civilian population in the nearby village by rounding up all the boys and men and mass slaughtering them.



Torture of prisoners is used for interrogation to find the location of the enemy's hideout. A French soldier prepares the electric clamps which will be used; the actual process is shown offscreen.



In Algiers the Delon character observes police and soldiers supervising locals who are painting over the political slogans which appear on walls every night.





The Algerian family recovers the body of their teen boy who was shot by French police for painting “independence” on a wall.



The family’s eldest son, a French Army veteran of the Vietnam War (played by George Segal), subsequently joins the FLN in the countryside, bringing his military expertise to the local insurrection.

## *The Battle of Algiers:* dialectic of torture and national liberation

Directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) recreated key events in the French-Algerian war (1954-1962). The Algerians fought both in the countryside and in the cities for national liberation from French colonialism, and the urban guerrilla war was particularly intense, involving attacks on French colonial civilians and French army assaults on Algerian civilians. When the film appeared, that war was over, but the U.S. had ramped up the Vietnam war which had earlier been a French colony, so the parallels were inescapable.

The film was shot like a documentary, with on-location portable camera extensively employed. On release it was banned in France, and the controversial torture scenes were cut in the U.S. and U.K. distribution. In 2003, the *New York Times* reported that the Pentagon screened the film for officers and civilian experts who were discussing U.S. action in Iraq. The publicity read: "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas."

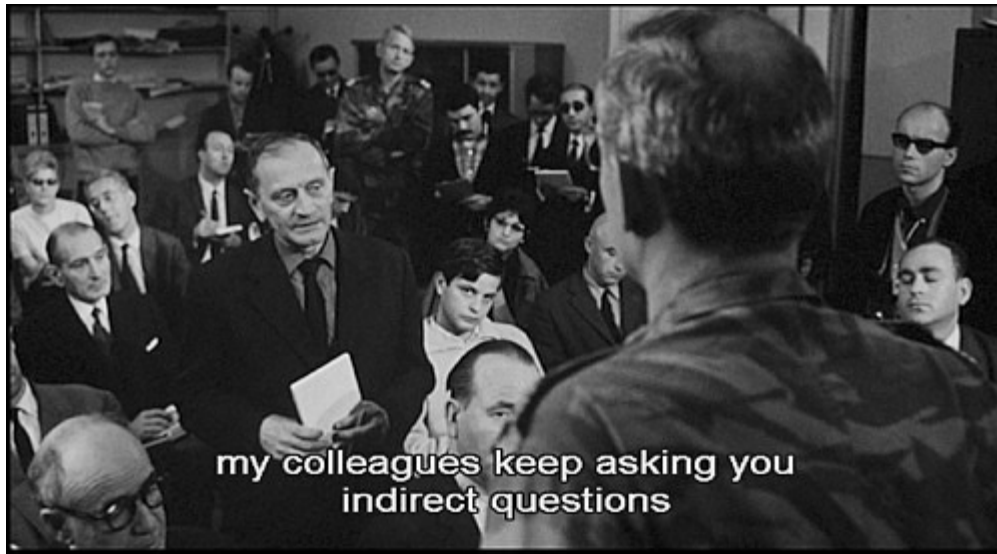
## The press conference

This sequence is a key turning point in the film. Up to this point we have seen the actions of the two sides: the FLN (National Liberation Front) and the Algerian community on the one side, and the French Army and the colonizers/administrators on the other. The stakes are laid out clearly here. (Of course we know while watching it that the French did leave, which changes the nature of the rhetorical set up. The internal dramatic



“if” becomes an understood “when.”)

Colonel Mathieu leads a press conference: three journalists ask questions about torture, and finally a fourth:



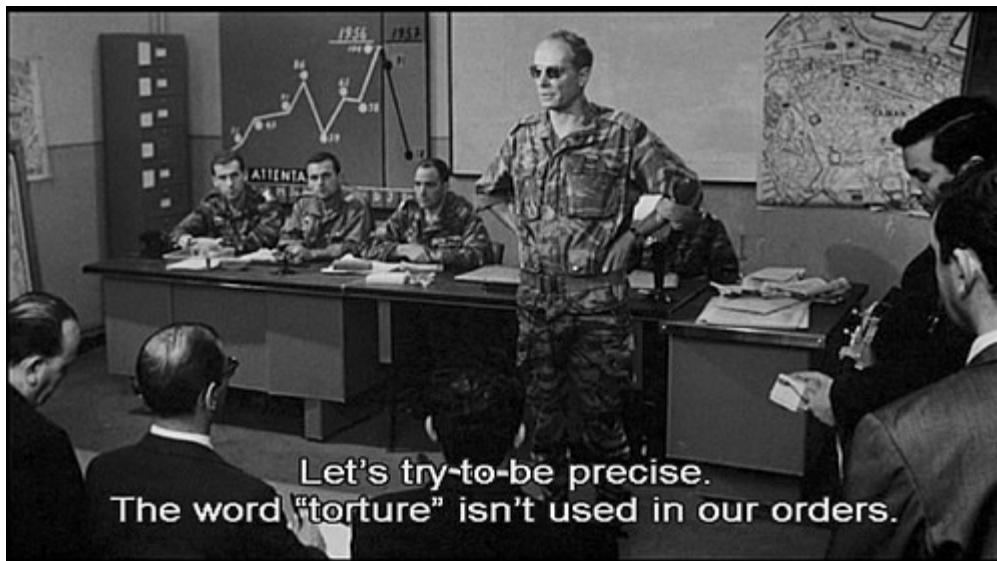
[01:32:42]

Journalist: “It seems to be that, perhaps out of an excess of caution, my colleagues keep asking you indirect questions to which you can replay in a round-about way. It would be better to call a spade a spade. So let’s talk about torture.”

Mathieu: “I understand. And you? Have you no question?”

Journalist: “They’ve all been asked. I’d just like more precise answers.”

[Reverse shot 01:33:13]



Mathieu: “Let’s try to be precise. The word ‘torture’ isn’t used in our orders. We use interrogation as the only valid police method against clandestine activity.”

[Reverse shot 1:33:26]

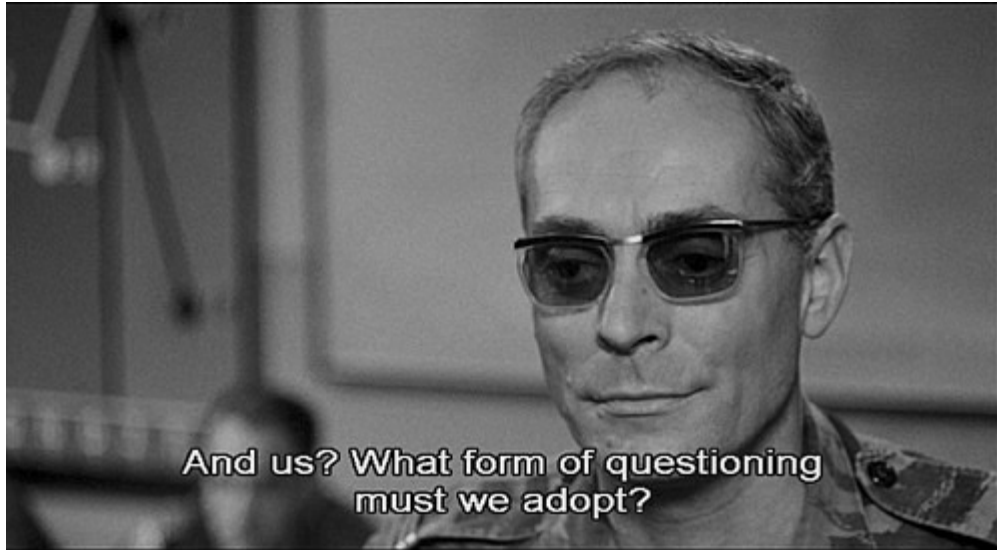
"The FLN asks all its members, in case of capture to remain silent for 24 hours."

[Cut CU]

"Then they may talk."

[Cut CU 1:33:36]

"This gives the FLN time to render any information useless."



"And us? What form of questioning must we adopt?"

[Cut]

"Civil law procedures, which take months for a mere misdemeanor?"

[MCU]

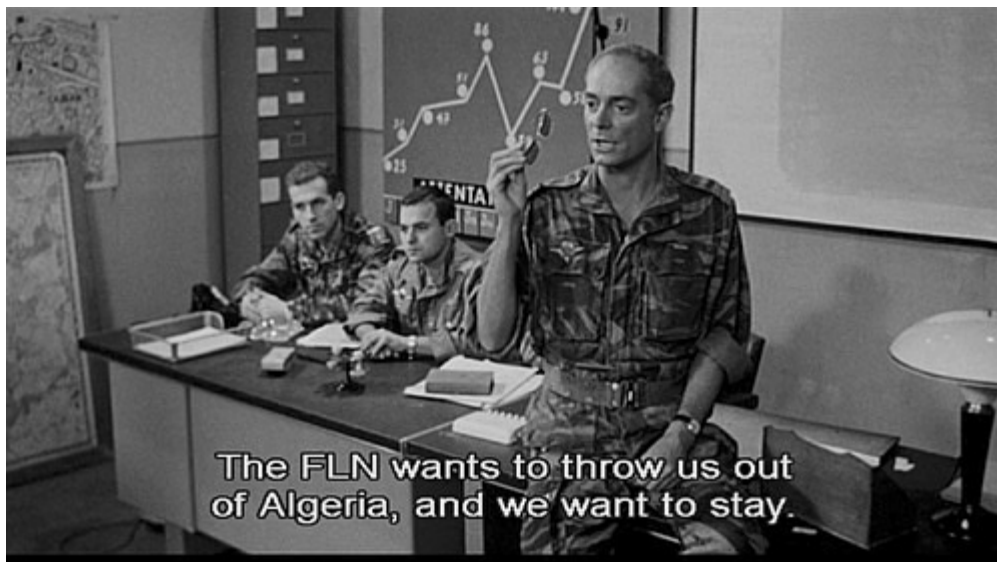
"Legality can be inconvenient. Is it legal to set off bombs in public places? Remember Ben M'Hidi's answer when you asked him the question. (removes glasses) No, gentlemen, believe me. It's a vicious circle."

[Cut]

"We could talk for hours to no avail, because that isn't the problem."

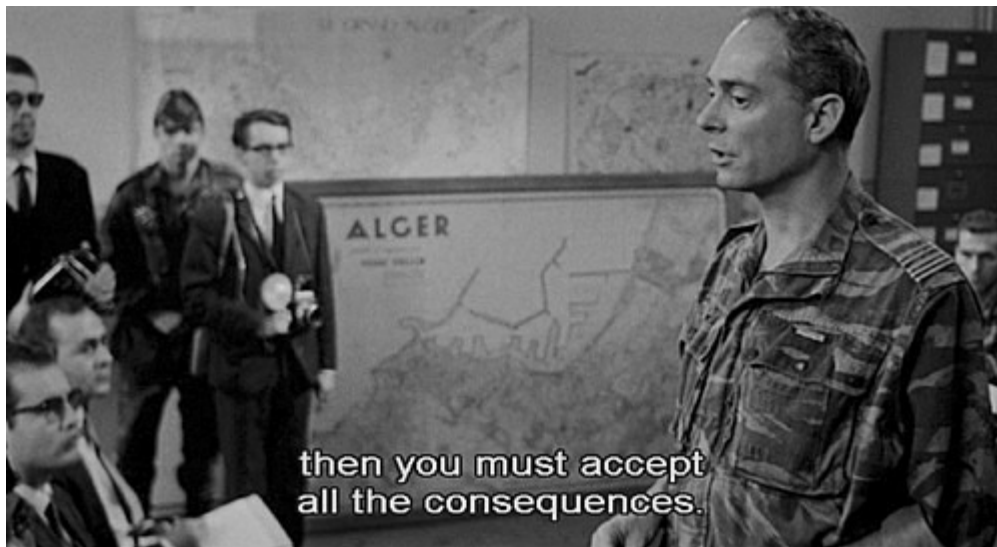
[Cut]

"The problem is this:"



[1:34:15]

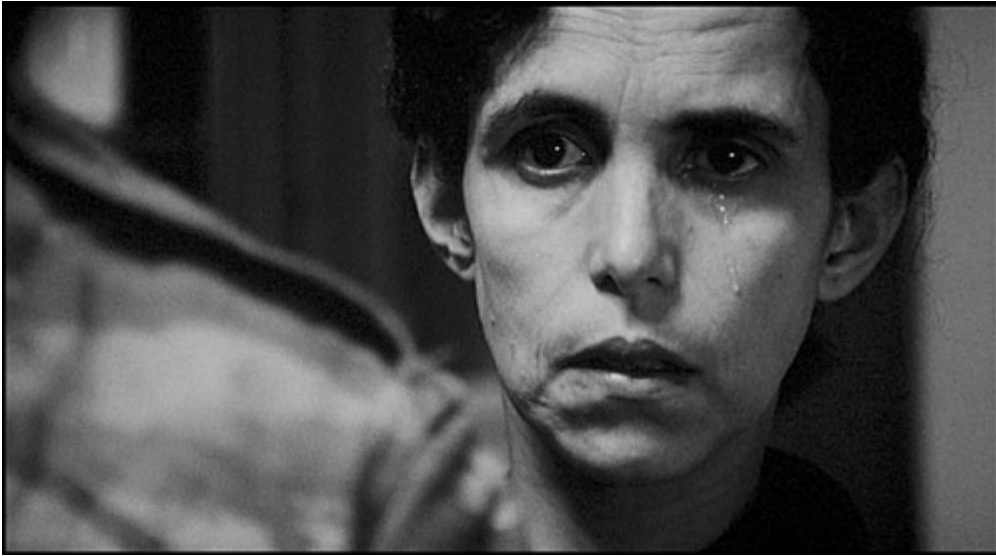
“The FLN wants to throw us out of Algeria, and we want to stay. Even with slight shades of opinion, you all agree that we must stay. When the FLN rebellion began, there were no shades at all. Every paper, the communist press included, wanted it crushed. We’re here for that reason alone. We’re neither madmen nor sadists. Those who call us fascists forget the role many of us played in the Resistance. Those who call us Nazis don’t know that some of us survived Dachau and Buchenwald.”



“We are soldiers. Our duty is to win. Therefore, to be precise, it’s my turn to ask a question. Should France stay in Algeria? If your answer is still yes, then you must accept all the consequences.”

The straight cut here to waterboarding is classic rhetorical positioning: a question is asked, and the next visuals answer it. The colonel: we are doing our duty (as assigned by politicians); if you believe in the policy, you must accept what we do. The visuals answer—no, we did not sign up for this, therefore the policy must be wrong, or we’ve changed our mind about the policy now that we realize the results.

[XCU1:35:12]  
Face—waterboarding.  
[1:35:19]



[XCU]  
Woman's face, tear, observing it.

[Pan]  
French soldier smokes, watching impassively.

[Cut 1:35:30]  
Foreground waterboarding in courtyard.

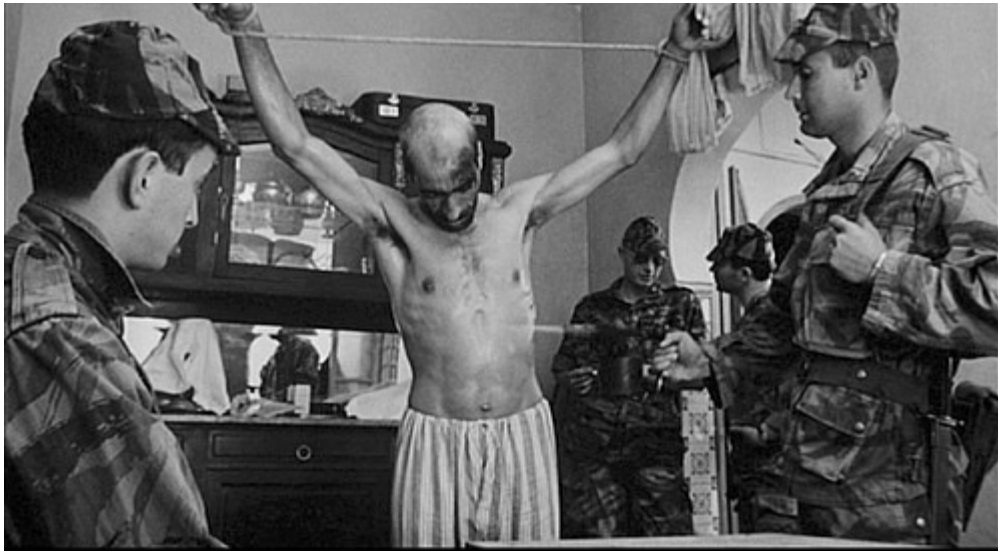


[1:35:37]  
Soldiers sit and smoke.

[1:35:40]  
Strung up bare, except striped loose pants.

This repeats a visual element in the public imagination from pictures of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps.

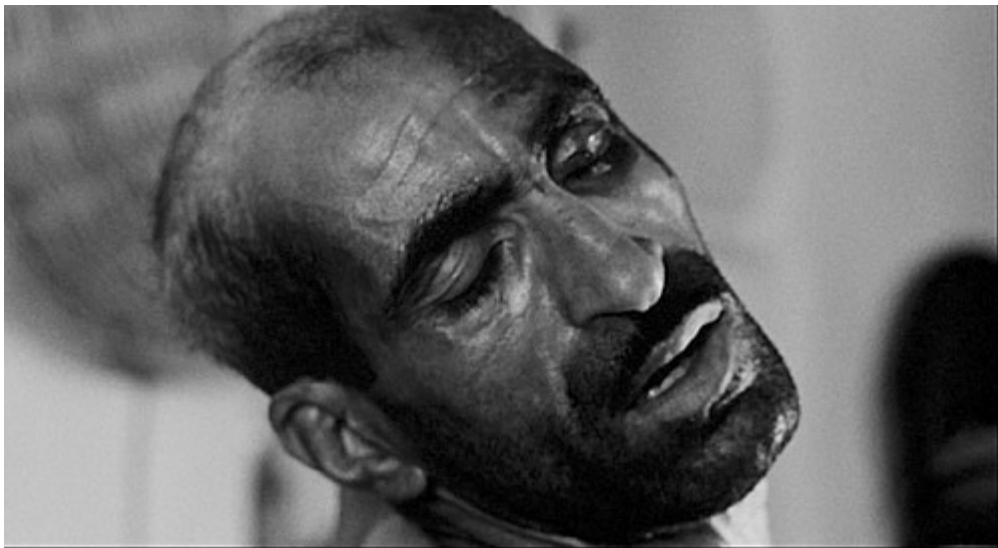
1:35:46



Soldier applies burner to torso.

[Cut XCU]  
Face in pain.

Recalls images of Christ in agony.



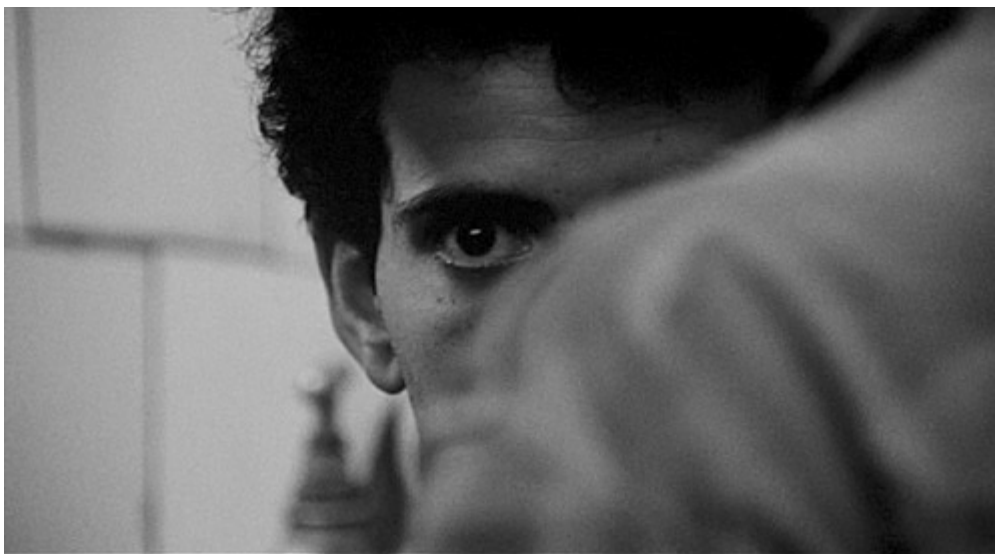
[1:35:54]  
Bound/tied/hanging upside down.

Visuals are reminiscent of Caravaggio, both in chiaroscuro lighting and the figure positions in the Descent from the Cross.



[Cut XCU]

Young man watching [returns to previous shot] with view blocked by soldier.



[1:36:16]

Soldier attaches electric wire clips to ears of prisoner.  
Reaction—convulsions.



Return to suspended man.



[Cut]



[1:36:32]

Woman's tears, slow zoom in on eyes.

[Cut]

NB: this cut establishes the response to the torture in a virtually syllogistic way: IF the troops torture, THEN a violent response against colonial civilians is to be expected and/or is justified.

[1:36:41]

Street scene, night, French quarter, café.



Ambulance comes down street; a body is thrown out of back door. Cry: "He's been stabbed!"



[CU]

From the ambulance, guns blazing at the French colonial pedestrians, ends with attempt to run pedestrians down.

The gunman's face resembles that of the (partially) seen young man who witnesses the torture above; therefore it draws a cause and effect relation: if torture, then terrorist



attacks on civilians.

[1:37:51]

Title: "26 August 1957," army raid on FLN.

The film sets up the collective responsibility for the behavior of the troops. IF France should stay, then all means are to be used to achieve this end. While the Colonel speaks to the press, he is really speaking to the French public. Thus the response to the torture, violence against civilian targets, completes the moral question. IF the French public supports the means of torture, it will find a response directed at itself. The response is appropriate, given the rhetoric of the argument.

[Go to page 3: \*Memories of Underdevelopment\*](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### *Memories of Underdevelopment:* the truth of the group is in the murderer

In one of the most remarkable and remarked on sections of this Cuban film (d. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968), newsreel film and journalist photos examine the Cuban trial of prisoners captured at the Bay of Pigs invasion. With CIA support, Cuban exiles attempted to establish a beachhead on the island (in order to then call for U.S. military support to overthrow the revolution). The apparent differences of occupation and degree of involvement by the exiles in the dictatorial and corrupt Batista regime is revealed to be superficial; all are accomplices in the crimes of the past.

Entire sequence (in Spanish, no subtitles)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EnYbmYh7Xo>

Just before the sequence formally begins, the film's protagonist, Sergio, begins to read to a friend from a book he bought earlier at a bookstore. The volume, *Bourgeois Morality and Revolution* by Leo Rozitchner, discusses the issues in terms of the trial of the captured prisoners and their statements. In the 98-shot sequence that then commences, Sergio reads interpretive passages from the book, plus there are some clips from the trial. A full description of the sequence from the continuity script (that is, based on the finished film) is available in English in Michael Chanan, ed., *Memories of Underdevelopment: Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Director, and Inconsolable Memories, Edmundo Desnoes, Author*. (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1990). This text supplants the earlier edition of the film script by Michael Myerson, which only reproduces the subtitles of the English language version of the film.



1. Title begins sequence.

Text: the truth of the group is in the killer.

Image: prisoners taken at the Bay of Pigs (Playa Girón), the CIA sponsored abortive invasion of Cuba by Miami-based Cuban exiles.



2. Captured prisoner walks past camera.



3. Father Lugo.

Sergio v.o. "the priest"



4. Fabio Freyre.

v.o. "the businessman"



5. Felipe Rivero.  
v.o. "dilettante official"



6. Ramón Calviño.  
v.o. "the torturer"



7. José Andreu.  
v.o. "the philosopher"



8. Carlos Varona.  
v.o. "the politician"



9. Prisoner.  
Sergio, v.o. "...and the innumerable sons of good families."



10. Calviño.  
Sergio, v.o., "Each one of them carried out specific duties and yet it was the whole, the group, which gave meaning to each individual activity."



11. Maria Elena, testifying at the trial.

"...he kicked me in the stomach and I had a hemorrhage. That wasn't enough for him. I had to fight so they wouldn't do that, and they broke two of my vertebrae....Do you remember?"



12. Human bones and instruments of torture on display.

Witness v.o. "When they started hitting him with sticks, he fell on his knees and you..."



13. Dictator Batista and police chief inspect confiscated weapons.

Witness, v.o. "...kicked him in the side and he sprawled on the floor. Don't you remember? And after you murdered him, you violated him too, because you're a dirty murderer."



14. Prisoners crowded into a cell.

Pilar, v.o. "Coward! You killed a man in front of me, I saw you!"

Calviño v.o. "In front of you?"



15. Corpse with throat slit.

Pilar, v.o. "After you killed Morua, nine days later, you arrested me and you sat down to tell me how you had killed him!"



16. Montage of high society in the Batista dictatorship.

Sergio, v.o. "In all capitalist societies, there is the same type of man at the disposition of the bourgeoisie, who is in charge of such special duties."



17. Batista era celebrants at a party.

Sergio, v.o. "In the division of moral work, the contract murderer allows those to exist who are not directly involved with death, and who want to display their clean souls."



18. Father Lugo, v.o.

"It seems as though you want to accuse me of being the originator of the invasion and all those things."



19. A priest offers communion on a ship preceding the Bay of Pigs landing.

Father Lugo, v.o.: "I want to insist that my mission was purely spiritual. I have never handled a weapon, before or after. The fact that one is



mixed up in a conspiracy doesn't make one a conspirator."



20. Two murdered women.

Sergio, v.o. "In fact, the murderer-torturer resorts to the category of totality in order to avoid claiming moral responsibility."



21. [Portion of an extended montage contrasting the conspirators and the victims.] Several corpses with bystanders.

Sergio, v.o. "But in none of the cases under review was there a recovery of the true dialectical relationship between individuals and the group. The others who came with Calviño in the invasion don't recognize themselves as part of the system which entangles them in their own acts. In the accounts of Freyre, the land baron; in the extreme unctious of Lugo, the priest; in the inheritance of the Babum brothers; in the delicate ideas of Andreu, the philosopher; in the dismissals and in the book of Rivero, the dilettante; in the 'representative democracy' of Varona; you cannot read clearly the death that through them spread over Cuba,..."



22. "...death by hunger,..."



23. Police use firehoses against protestors.  
Sergio, v.o. "...by sickness, by torture, by frustration."  
[Fade out]

## ***Law and Order: Special Victims Unit:*** **physical assault during police interrogation**

Episode: "Pandora," Season 4, no 15 (air date: 2/7/2003)

The SVU detectives are depicted as having to maintain strict adherence to rules while pursuing the most despicable sex offense criminals. (For example, frequent mentions remind viewers that criminals who are guilty of sexual crimes against children are often assaulted by other prisoners when incarcerated.) A repeated subplot theme reveals that the detectives' ability to remain dispassionate in pursuing justice is often tested against their personal history and psychology.

NYPD Detective Elliot Stabler (Christopher Meloni) goes to Prague (where the local police ignore child prostitution, we are told) in pursuit of Tassig, a child pornographer who has seduced a 14 year old NYC runaway. Finding the girl, he and an Interpol agent track down the molester and interrogate him in a Czech prison, hoping to find another child whose image was circulated on the internet.



1. Referring to the runaway,  
Tassig: "She's an adventurous woman!"  
Stabler: "She's a 14 year old girl you filmed being drugged and raped."



2. Increasingly angry at the defiant prisoner, Stabler threatens.  
Tassig: "No! I am not a deviant!"  
Stabler slams his elbow against the seated prisoner's throat, sending the man falling backward to the floor.



3. "You can't, it is against your laws."  
The pedophile pornographer objects that NYPD police are prohibited from harsh interrogation. The Interpol police officer remarks that such rules don't apply since they are in the Czech Republic. (Earlier, the

Interpol agent pointed out that the Czech authorities routinely ignore obvious child prostitution because it brings in sex tourism money.)



4. Taunted by the pornographer, Stabler hits the prisoner's chest, then his stomach. He then picks up the man and slams him down on the interrogation table.



5. Shaken, the prisoner says he doesn't know the young child, or where she is, but her name is Amy.

Back at the U.S. Embassy, a technician explains that examining Tassig's computers they discovered a child porn site called "Amy's Little Secret." But to access it you need a password which is sold by a business back in New York. Stabler returns. Raiding that location, the police get a further lead to find Amy in NYC.



6. Conducting a raid, Stabler finds the child who says her father is asleep.



7. He enters the bedroom, places his gun against the man's forehead while ominous music plays.



8. The prolonged tableau implies that Stabler must decide between performing his own justice by killing the man or following procedures by arresting him. He takes a deep breath, shakes his head, as if clearing his thoughts.





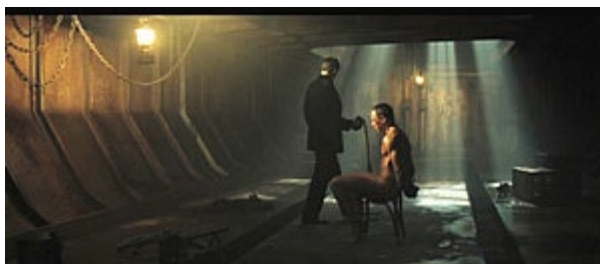
9. He awakens the criminal and says the man is under arrest.



10. "Where's my daughter?"  
 Stabler pauses again, in close up,  
 "Where's your daughter? Like you give a damn!"

The bedroom scene plays out at 50 seconds; long for a normally fast-paced show. Regular viewers know that Stabler often has a deep personal edge when a case involves girl and adolescent female victims, reflecting his own situation as father of two daughters.

## *Casino Royale*: torture as testing the hero





*Casino Royale* (d. Martin Campbell, 2006) was a deliberate attempt to re-invigorate the Bond franchise. In a familiar situation in James Bond films, Bond is held prisoner and tortured. As well noted by reviewers, this Bond film loses the high tech weapons, CGI action effects and defiance of the laws of physics for a concentration on a well-muscled man, here captured and held in a dark dungeon. Naked, Bond (Daniel Craig) is tied to a chair with the seat removed and then repeatedly struck with a knotted rope on his genitals by Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen). The sexual overtones are explicit. Enduring agonizing pain, the scene ends with Bond rescued rather than himself turning the tables on his tormentor.

## ***Body of Lies*: torture as punishment**

In this 2008 Ridley Scott thriller, Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) is an on-the-ground Middle East CIA agent who is managed by Ed Hoffman (Russell Crowe) back at headquarters. Assigned to track down a terrorist leader (read Bin Laden), he tries to work with Jordanian official Hani Salaam (Mark Strong).



1. At a site in Jordan, Ferris is shown whipping in progress by the head of the Jordanian intelligence system.

41:24



2. We have heard the lash on flesh and the victim's cries of pain. The reverse shot shows the process as Salaam states that this is not "torture" but "punishment, a very different thing." We are in Ferris's position, not quite understanding. Later, in retrospect, we realize that this event is not for extracting information from a recalcitrant prisoner but rather a punishment to a secret agent/traitor who has failed his mission.

41.29



3. Himself a prisoner of the terrorists, Ferris has a finger cut off by the leader who leaves him to be worked over and executed. DiCaprio struggles as the thugs hold him down to videotape the event.



4. In a trite cliffhanger finale, after brandishing a large knife, the leading henchman moves to cut Ferris's abdomen....just as the Jordanian security forces arrive to rescue him from death. He was bait to trap the chief, who unwittingly walks into a waiting SUV to depart only to find out he is under arrest.

[Go to page 4: 24](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### 24: torture and the ticking bomb

While every season of *24* is filled with interrogation torture scenes and events, season two had several notable examples.

In *24* it should be noted that Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) himself undergoes torture or other physical and mental distress throughout the series. This highlights his own heroism but also serves as a standard of comparison. Jack suffers, but never breaks. This is underlined when he interrogates Nina Myers, a woman who supplied key information to the terrorists who bombed the Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) facility in L.A. (killing, among others, Jack's wife) and who knows who the ringleader is in a plot to detonate an atomic bomb in Los Angeles.

### Season 2, episode 6

1-2 pm

Nina is held at CTU. She has received a Presidential pardon if she cooperates.



Frustrated that she won't reveal everything she knows, Jack interrogates her with physical force, choking her. He is observed on monitors outside the room by others. At the high point of his (apparent) rage, he is stopped and taken outside. Accused of being out of control and having a personal agenda because his wife died, Jack argues he is completely in control and rational. Only severe action will make the prisoner talk.



He is allowed to continue and returns to the interrogation room, pulls out his pistol and threatens Nina. He fires two shots, one on either side of her head, and continues.



Finally he places the gun against her head and she breaks down and gives up the information.

## Season 2, episode 12

### 7-8 pm



In another plot development, the President has discovered Roger Stanton, the head of the National Security Agency (NSA), is trying to subvert the government by making connections to a far-right paramilitary group, Coral Snake, and a former CIA network. He authorizes an FBI agent to harshly interrogate Stanton with electric shocks. The President watches on a computer screen as the torture takes place. He tells his Chief of Staff that “everyone breaks eventually.” Since the “liberal” President is personally observing and supervising as well as authorizing physical torture, any further torture by Jack Bauer seems allowable, if not consecrated by official power.



Meanwhile, Jack has been trying to break the captured terrorist, Syed Ali, to tell where the bomb is. First he uses physical coercion, at one point apparently breaking the prisoner's arm and promising that he can make the man's death excruciatingly painful. The prisoner resists. An Imam, the head of the local mosque where Ali was captured, is brought in who says that killing innocents is against Islamic beliefs. Ali remains defiant.



Jack then has video monitors brought in and shows live images of Ali's wife and two boys held prisoners abroad. Jack threatens to kill the oldest boy if Ali doesn't reveal where the bomb is.



Ali resists, and Jack gives the order for execution. The execution appears to take place: the boy has been strapped to a chair, the chair is tipped back and a masked man fires his pistol several times at the child. Jack promises to execute the other boy.



Finally Ali breaks down and tells where the bomb is and what the plan is for denotation. As Ali is taken away, the monitors reveal the event was staged and Ali's son is still alive.

The scene with the Imam provides a crucial moral plot point. By saying that terrorism that kills civilians is against the fundamental beliefs of Islam, the terrorists are situated as religious fanatics, outside of orthodox Muslim practice. This provides a declaration that not all Muslims are terrorists and that those who are have perverted the faith. (And thus seems to shield the show from being labeled anti-Muslim.) It also serves, in retrospect, to validate Bauer's strategy. In fact, he would not kill Ali's family, but he would theatrically stage the killing to force the prisoner to answer the questions. Jack is within the strict rules of Islam to not kill innocents. However Ali was perfectly willing to kill a million or more with the nuclear bomb. Of course within the law and the Geneva Conventions, what Jack does is completely illegal. And within any religion — Muslim, Christian, or Judaism — threatening to kill someone's family, and then enacting it with them as witness, is completely immoral. Although U.S. Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia doesn't seem capable of grasping this point, as indicated by his public relish of this sequence in *24*.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Notes

1. Andrew Sullivan, "Scalia and torture," [http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the\\_daily\\_dish/2007/06/scalia\\_and\\_tort.html](http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2007/06/scalia_and_tort.html) quoting from Colin Freeze, "What would Jack Bauer do?" *Globe and Mail*, June 16, 2007. [[return to essay](#)]
2. Jan Crawford Greenburg, Howard L. Rosenberg, and Ariane de Vogue, "Sources: Top Bush Advisors Approved 'Enhanced Interrogation,'" *ABC News*, April 2, 2008. <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=4583256>
3. The CIA was particularly concerned with protecting its agents from later prosecution if the matter came to light. Even after the then secret and now-notorious Bybee/Yoo "Golden Shield" memo of August 2002, authorizing extreme means, CIA interrogators continued to check back for step by step approval, which would seem to indicate they knew they were placing themselves in jeopardy for using torture.
4. Paul Kramer, "The Water Cure," *New Yorker*, Feb. 25, 2008. [www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/02/25080225fa\\_fact\\_kramer?prntable=true](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/02/25080225fa_fact_kramer?prntable=true)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Torture documentaries

by [Julia Lesage](#)

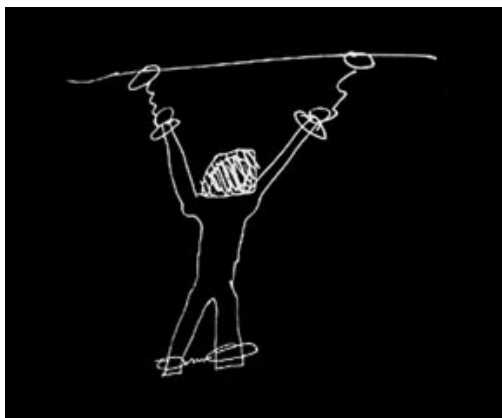
Images from *Taxi to the Dark Side*



Sgt. Thomas Curtis, former MP at Bagram prison in Afghanistan.



Curtis demonstrates how prisoners were shackled for long periods of time.



He drew this picture for Army

To begin with, I would like to encourage readers of this essay to see one of the films described below, even better, two, so they can evaluate how a documentary might analyze U.S. involvement in torture.[1a][[open endnotes in new window](#)] To see these films now is important because the issue itself, state-sanctioned torture, has become *the* issue of our time, especially in the United States. Historically speaking, the films participate in our collectively creating a "story" around torture. Developing such a narrative, which is both descriptive and analytical, influences how we imagine and act on what happened, how we formulate our activism. Later, as years pass after this traumatic event, we may develop an "official version" of what happened—as seen, for example, in the Holocaust Museum or other museums dedicated to catastrophes—but it will long be a contested version, both in the way it is framed and in the aspects of the trauma that it elides. For teachers, these documentaries provide excellent classroom material. The films open onto other readily available information on the Internet and in books for student research, for example, or shown together in pairs they provide media and social studies classes with usefully contrastive examples of the "framing" of contemporary issues which most students would like to be informed about.

In general, documentary filmmakers who take on the task of representing a large-scale event of historical importance do us a service. Their films give information about the subject, indicate ways of dealing with the issues, invite an emotional response, and invoke an ethical stance. They offer a path to mastery over a complex topic, even if it is only a provisional mastery that becomes more nuanced and revised the more we consider other facts and other voices on the subject. In this instance, because there is so much information about the issue of torture, far more than any one person can remember or easily draw upon, the documentaries offer a structure for organizing that knowledge, setting out main ideas that can shape further exploration or be modified as the viewer reads more about the subject on his/her own. In this way, the films are a valuable tool for any concerned viewer, especially activists, since the films place an emphasis on understanding and also draw attention to *how* we understand. That is, the films indicate how information about torture is repressed, mediated, and filtered before it ever gets to the public eye.

Interestingly, the torture documentaries have as a predecessor a visual text that suddenly irrupted into public history in 2004, a text collectively known as the Abu Ghraib photographs. These images seemed to have come from "below," bypassing political censorship. In terms of their institutional impact, the Abu Ghraib photographs initiated an intense, long-term scrutiny of U.S. involvement in torture and illegal abduction and detention of prisoners. As images, the photographs remain shocking and puzzling. As political documents, they reveal a previously hidden world that seems to sum up imperialism's racialized and sexualized domination and abuse.

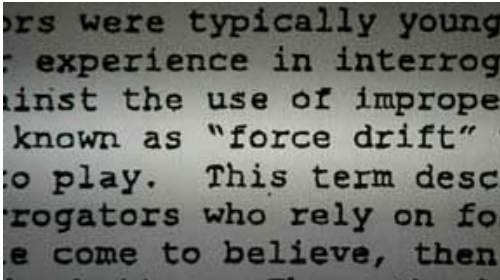
In addition to the Abu Ghraib photographs, because of legal action from



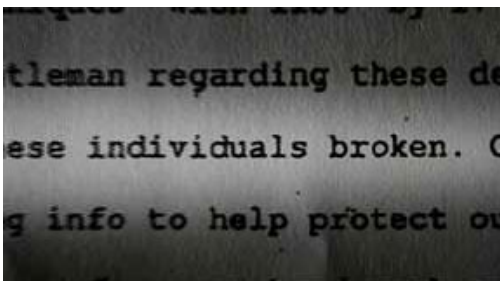
investigators.



It later appeared in the *New York Times*.



Once torture starts, it escalates.



Official words carry emotional weight.

progressive organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Constitutional Rights, many military and government documents related to U.S. torture policy have been released. Some journalists have now devoted years to uncovering the history of this abuse as well. The Internet has become a tool for disseminating texts of analytic essays and primary documents, often in PDF form, and many journalists, lawyers, and activists have blogs that discuss both news and legal strategies, in addition to offering first-person narratives and opinions from those most directly involved. This pursuit of knowledge around torture continues unabated in the United States, and the massive quantity of information we now have is one of the topics I wish to explore in the essay below.

In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols explains documentary's pursuit of knowledge and the sense of mastery it gives, calling that pursuit *epistophilia*. Nichols explains how epistophilia is often the goal of both documentary filmmaker and documentary viewer. He delimits this sense of mastery, however, since documentary epistophilia mediates and filters information, structuring it in relation to the spectator who receives and uses it:

"Documentary convention spawns an epistophilia. It posits an organizing agency that possesses information and knowledge, a text that conveys it, and a subject who will gain it. He-who-knows (the agency is usually masculine) will share that knowledge with those-who-wish-to-know; they, too, can take the place of the subject-who-knows. Knowledge, as much or more than the imaginary identification between viewer and fictional character, promises the viewer a sense of plenitude or self-sufficiency. Knowledge, like the ideal-ego figures or objects of desire suggested by the characters of narrative fiction, becomes a source of pleasure that is far from innocent. Who are we that we may know something? Of what does that knowledge consist? What we know and how we use the knowledge that we have are a matter of social and ideological significance." [1]

I am interested in Nichols' approach not only because he qualifies documentary's granting spectators a sense of mastery and insists on the social uses of documentary epistophilia, but also because he leaves something out when he describes documentary's pursuit of knowledge, something documentaries about torture cannot elide—the role of affect, the affect the very information conveys (or rhetorically tries to suppress). Viewers cannot learn about torture without coming into contact with strong emotion. All the filmmakers who use images and first-person testimony of abuse understand that this material has a great emotional charge; it conveys the repeated story of people intending to inflict grievous harm on others. But the torture documentary uses this material differently than it might be used in we-know-it's-not-real works of fiction. Documentary images of torture and people's descriptions of torture become part of history, and they bear an affective charge enhanced by the genre's "representation of reality."

Such an affective charge not only adheres to documentary images, such as in photojournalism or the Abu Ghraib photographs, but also to the way these films use witnesses to torture, sometimes perpetrators and abused. For example, a number of these torture documentaries have interviews with lower-ranking military figures accused and perhaps convicted of torturing prisoners in Bagram and Abu Ghraib prisons. As I watch them in close-up talking to the camera, these former guards and interrogators seem sympathetic, yet I know of their terrible acts. As they speak, I search their faces for signs of remorse and any indication that they are lying or telling the truth. My emotional response, especially to the Abu Ghraib photographs, conflicts with these people's

- Stress positions for a maximum of four hours (e.g., standing)
- Use of falsified documents or reports
- Isolation up to 30 days (requires notice)
- Interrogation outside of the standard interrogation booth
- Deprivation of light and auditory stimuli
- Hooding during transport & interrogation
- Use of 20 hour interrogations
- Removal of all comfort items
- Switching detainees from hot meal to MRE
- Removal of clothing

Techniques authorized for Guantanamo.

Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 stand for 8-10 hours  
 stand, limited to 4 hours?  
 D.A. DEC 02 2002

Rumsfeld signs his memo authorizing severe techniques with: "However, I stand for 8-10 hours a day. Why is standing limited to 4 hours?"

at the end of what would then re-ask whether it was not nod-and-a-wink to interrogants not feel bound by the themselves authorized necessary information. authorized, threatened

His note encourages military personnel to take the abuse much further.

Part I, we examine the criminal statutes constitute torture as defined in Section 340. Physical pain amounting to torture means any serious physical injury, such as or even death. For purely mental pain 340, it must result in significant psychological pain for months or even years. We conclude of the predicate acts listed in the statute

expressed attitudes about past events and about themselves.

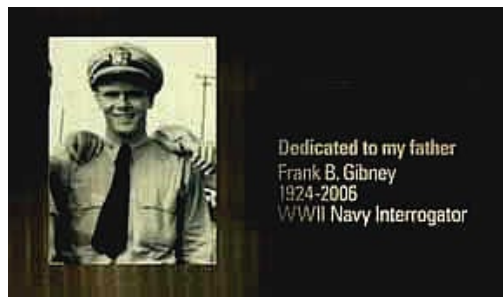
At this point, I would like to step back and indicate something about my own writing style in this essay. From time to time, as I have done here, I will focus on my own spectatorial response in an autoethnographic way as a case study. While analyzing the emotional dimensions of the torture documentary, I hope to write in a way that could embrace a potentially wide range of responses, especially in terms of affect. By locating myself as a viewer, then, I would like anchor the discussion of affect with more specificity. In addition, I mention my viewing experience of evaluating these interviewees because that particular aspect of the torture documentary relates to my ongoing scholarly work. For example, I evaluate the eye-witnesses' reports according to my interest in autobiography and predilection for emotional expressiveness and melodrama in film. Specifically, I have a theoretical interest in the first-person voice as used in non-fiction reportage and film. Here the pronoun and speaking position "I" invites, as it were, a direct connection to a "you," in this case, me the viewer. In documentary film, such an "I" rarely has the complexity of literary autobiography, which often takes pains to explore mixed, layered aspects of the self, complexities of past situations, and one's own mixed motives and shifting ambivalence. In contrast, in non-fiction film and television, the "I" who's interviewed usually speaks words edited into a documentary argument. I am emotionally moved by what these interviewees from Bagram, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo have to say and by their direct address to the camera, but as I scrutinize them, their subjectivity ultimately eludes me.[2]

I have organized this essay to explore two large aspects of the torture documentary—epistophilia and affect. To do so, and also to give some indication about genre structures, I provide a textual analysis of three highly accomplished films: two documentaries—*Taxi to the Dark Side* and *Standard Operating Procedure*—and a docudrama—*The Road to Guantanamo*. However, in the way that the documentaries actually work, knowledge and affect are not so neatly divided; all these documentaries elicit emotion and purvey knowledge and are structured to do so. Thus, even though I particularly use *Taxi to the Dark Side* to consider how it uses voices of authority—and more generally to offer my own to challenge torture epistophilia at this moment in the United States—I also consider how the film uses photojournalistic images for emotion, especially irony. In the same way, I use a textual analysis of *Standard Operating Procedure*, which takes as its topic just the Abu Ghraib photographs, to explore issues of affect in the torture documentary. However, I also explore how the film works as an analytic documentary, one that explores what the photograph, or indeed witnesses, can and cannot convey. *Standard Operating Procedure* particularly raises the question of "authenticity" in relation to its interviewees. It uses lengthy segments of people talking, with edited moments from what were clearly very long interviews, and the camera holds on them after a speech to capture just their individual expressions. We are asked to evaluate not only the history of Abu Ghraib torture that these participants tell us about but also how much we trust what they have to say.

Because of the historical role of the Abu Ghraib photographs and their shocking image material, I consider the photographs on their own terms, first in terms of torture, sexuality, and theatricality; and then in terms of elements within those photos that shape viewer response. Finally I offer a briefer textual analysis of



John Yoo narrows the definition of torture to allow the U.S. to escape the Geneva Conventions.



Frank Gibney's interview ends the film.

*The Road to Guantanamo*, which as a docudrama has its own particular way of evoking the specifics of a situation and eliciting an emotional and political response.

## The documentaries under consideration here:

*Taxi to the Dark Side*, dir. Alex Gibney, 2007: This film uses the documented homicide of an Afghan taxi driver in Bagram prison as the focus for interviewing Bagram prison guards and interrogators, as well as for investigating U.S. government policy and the legal and social/psychological issues around torture. The film incorporates dramatic reenactments and many still images taken by photojournalists on the political or war beat.

*Standard Operating Procedure*, dir. Errol Morris, 2008: Morris explores the circumstances around the Abu Ghraib photographs. He interviews participants from Abu Ghraib, freely uses dramatic reenactments, and edits to a highly emotional musical score by Danny Elfman. The film shows many Abu Ghraib photographs uncropped and at length as it questions what photographs can and cannot convey, what's outside the frame. Morris collaborated with Philip Gourevitch to write a book of the same name based on the transcribed interviews, court testimonies and depositions, and other documentation about torture, especially the abuses at Abu Ghraib. Morris has an extensive web site, and he also writes lengthy entries for a blog at the *New York Times* including many issues directly related to this film.[3]

*The Road to Guantanamo*, dir. Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross, 2006, Channel 4, UK: This low-budget docudrama uses actors and the original figures of the Tipton Three, who provided one of the first exposés of Guantanamo abuses in England. The film traces the long journey of the young men, UK citizens from a Pakistani background, who traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan shortly after 9/11, were captured by the Northern Alliance, imprisoned by the U.S. military in Kandahar and Guantanamo, and two years later released. Because the film was made for activism, it was released on DVD and television within days of its theatrical release.

*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*, dir. Rory Kennedy, 2007, HBO: Kennedy situates torture in the context of the Milgram experiments. In the film are interviews with MPs (military police) and MIs (military intelligence) from Abu Ghraib; legal figures and authors such as Mark Danner who explain torture's larger context. Uniquely, Kennedy interviews as witnesses former Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib who testify to being tortured there. The HBO website for the film has a useful resource page with links and a brief bibliography.[4]

*The Torture Question*, Frontline, PBS, Oct. 18, 2005, written and dir. Michael Kirk: *The Torture Question* traces the history of national public policy decisions made in Washington after 9/11 about interrogation practices—including an internal administration battle over the Geneva Conventions. The film follows how that interrogation policy laid the groundwork for prisoner abuse in Afghanistan; Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; and Iraq. Like other Frontline documentaries, this film has an excellent website with many resources, including debates with legal experts, analysis pages, full text of interviews, history, teachers' guide, links.[5]

*Torturing Democracy*, 2008, PBS; consultant, Jane Mayer, author of *The Dark Side*; written and produced by Sherry Jones: The film develops an history and argument, using an essay-like narration, read by Peter Coyote, and supplemented by brief segments from a wide range of interviews and testimony from detainees. It traces the history of torture after 9/11 and U.S. response to the legal issues that the government's stance poses. This film is part of a larger

project, the Torture Archive, and has an excellent web site, including an annotated transcript of the film text, more full-length interviews, links to key documents, a study guide, annotated links to online articles and blogs, and a brief well-selected bibliography.[6]

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

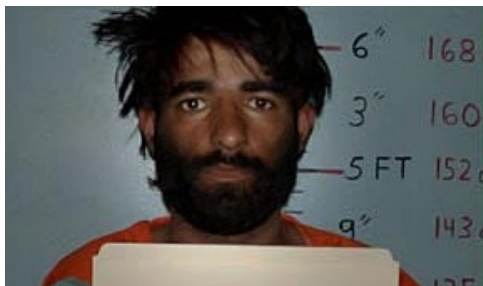


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Taxi to the Dark Side*



Few pictures remain of Dilawar. Here, his mugshot from Bagram prison.

## Part one: *Taxi to the Dark Side* and torture epistophilia

### *Taxi to the Dark Side* and some facts about torture

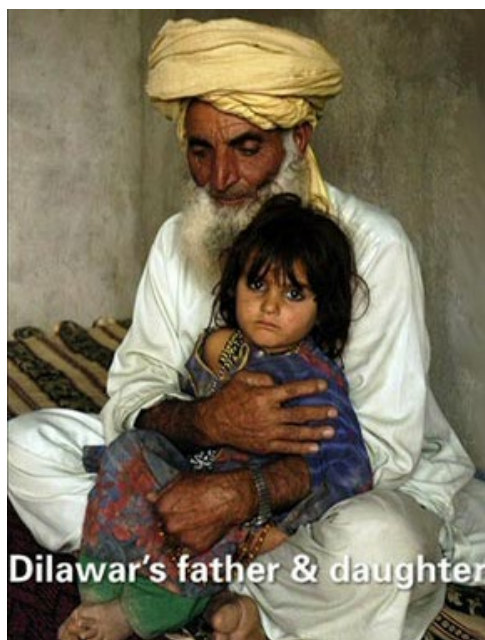
Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side* uses a detective story structure. The narrative investigates the story of one man's homicide in Bagram Prison by tracing out ever-widening circles of cause and effect until it arrives at the larger crime of U.S. government-sponsored torture. In its broadest scope, the film analyzes torture and its effects but it also circles back at intervals to the opening story. This emblematic crime, the murder of Dilawar, a rural Afghani taxi driver, accrues more and more layers of meaning and affect.



Dilawar had a new taxi and had driven it to the provincial capital to look for passengers.



He came back to his village to sleep every night, bringing provisions for the family.



Arrested along with Dilawar, his two passengers were released when the bomber of a nearby U.S. outpost was found.



They had been turned in by the local warlord who had committed the crime. The U.S. offered big rewards for denunciations and arrests.





Dilawar's village is just a few houses...

...with the extended family working the land.



The forensic photograph of Dilawar's corpse.

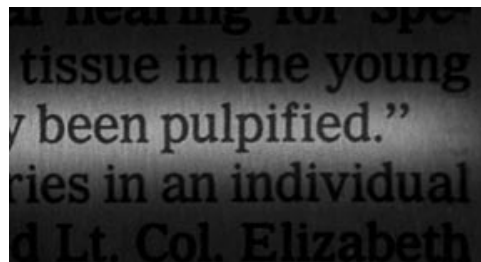
Gibney presents the story of Dilawar largely through interviews with MPs (military police) and MIs (military interrogators) who worked at Bagram Prison in 2002. He also interviews *New York Times* reporters Carlotta Gall and Tim Golden, who uncovered the story and presented it to the public. Dilawar, the taxi driver, died following five days in captivity in December 2002, just several days after another prisoner, Habibullah, was murdered in the same prison. The men died in a similar way. At Bagram, prisoners were regularly shackled with their hands over their head, cuffed to chains hanging from the ceiling; their legs were also shackled together. Standing for very long periods in a chained position led to pooling of the blood in the legs, severe inflammation, and blood clot formation. Habibullah's death came from a blood clot that traveled from his beaten legs to his heart and lungs. In Dilawar's case, death also came from repeated strikes to his legs, especially at and just above the knees. MPs learned this kind of blow, called a peroneal strike, in military training where they learned to subdue prisoners by kneeling them so as to hit a specific nerve center in the leg. In Dilawar's case, because he called out "Allah, Allah" when struck like that, his cries amused the guards. Consequently many came in to knee and kick him just to hear him call out. The Army Coroner's report, uncovered by Carlotta Gall, ruled Dilawar's death a homicide, and it listed the cause as repeated blows to his legs, which caused a heart attack. The corner also wrote that Dilawar's legs had been "pulpified" and would have needed amputation if he had survived.

Mort accidentelle	
SUICIDE Suicide	NAME OF PATHOLOGIST ELIZABETH
X HOMICIDE Homicide	SIGNATURE Sig
DATE OF DEATH (Hour, day, month, year) Date de décès (l'heure, le jour, le mois, l'année)	

The Army Coroner's report actually listed Homicide as cause of death.



Forensic photo of the pulpified legs.



New York Times article on Dilawar.



Cinematic juxtaposition of coroner's report and forensic photograph.

In terms of the film's documentary function, it needs to depict the specific torture procedures enacted upon Dilawar and other Bagram prisoners for a number of reasons. One narrative line relates how torture techniques directly migrated from Guantanamo to Bagram and then to Abu Ghraib. Captain Caroline Wood, who led the 519th MI Battalion at Bagram (and won the Bronze Medal for Valor in January 2003 for service there), had a posting at Abu Ghraib in July 2003, shortly after the Iraq war began, where she took control of intelligence operations. Later she admitted to Army investigators that while in Bagram, she had incorporated harsh techniques such as stress positions, forced standing, sleep deprivation, and use of dogs because she faced pressure from above to get more intelligence. In Iraq, she contributed directly to the general interrogation rules issued in September 2003 by General Ricardo Sanchez, military commander in Iraq, a list posted on the walls of Abu



Captain Caroline Wood now teaches military interrogation at the United States Intelligence Center, Ft. Huachuca, AZ.

Ghraib Prison at the time the infamous photos were shot.[7][[open endnotes in new window](#)] In addition, specific torture techniques spread more directly to Bagram from Guantanamo. As *New York Times* reporter Tim Golden states in the film,

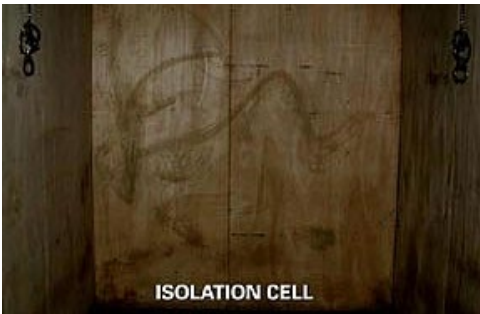
"...in early December 2002 the interrogators at Bagram looked on the Internet, they're in touch with the interrogators at Guantanamo, and they learned that these guys in Guantanamo had gotten new techniques from the Secretary of Defense, and they just started using them."

Through having witnesses describe what happened to Dilawar and by introducing the voices of other authorities on the subject of torture, *Taxi to the Dark Side* analyzes the procedures and consequences of particular interrogation "techniques," particularly sleep and sensory deprivation and "stress positions" such as forced standing and overhead shackling. What is important about this presentation within the film is that many viewers do not understand how such treatment of prisoners is clearly torture, torture of a particular kind, "torture lite." Torture that does not leave visible marks on the body as proof that it happened has a sad history in twentieth century democracies, especially the United States, Israel and the United Kingdom. Although Israel and the UK eventually legislated against such practices after long struggles and public denouncements, the U.S., especially the CIA, has not done so. As *Taxi to the Dark Side* widens out its investigation and analysis, it thus offers succinct explanations of torture's history and effects, especially in the post-WW2 history of the CIA's development of investigative techniques. Alfred McCoy, author of *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation from the Cold War to the War on Terror*,[8] describes in the film how the CIA learned to use sensory deprivation as a tactic to break down the psyche quickly (seen now in the ubiquitous hooding of prisoners in Afghanistan and Iraq) and induce confusion, dread, and dependency. As MI and MP witnesses who worked in Bagram Prison describe their instructions to enforce a regimen of sleep deprivation there, the film shows a wall chart on which the MIs wrote schedules for sleep scheduling; on it, a timeline for each prisoner indicates with arrows how many hours "up" and "down." Pfc. Damian Corsetti, MI, describes the tactic's effect,

"If you've ever seen someone sleep-depped, past two days they just begin to be mumbling idiots; three days sleep deprivation, they're just worthless."

The soldiers say that using stress positions, especially overhead shackling with its threat of shoulder dislocation if the prisoner falls asleep or passes out, meshes well with sleep deprivation to breakdown individual self-sufficiency. Alfred McCoy points out that using standing as a torture tactic makes prisoners themselves feel at fault, as if holding up or holding out relied upon their own effort and will. What McCoy does not talk about in the film is that some of these techniques were developed decades before by the British for use against the IRA and were known there as the "five techniques": forced standing, hooding, sleep deprivation, starvation and thirst, and noise bombardment.[9] As used at Bagram, forced standing for up to 72 hours at a time, especially with leg shackling, would have severe physiological effects. A *Slate* dossier on "The Taxonomy of Torture" describes the effects in detail:

"In 1956, the CIA commissioned two Cornell Medical Center researchers to study Soviet interrogation techniques. They concluded, 'The KGB simply made victims stand for eighteen to twenty-four hours, producing 'excruciating pain' as ankles double in size, skin becomes 'tense and intensely painful,' blisters erupt oozing 'watery serum,' heart rates soar, kidneys shut down, and delusions deepen.'"[10]



Shackles are attached by chains to the wire mesh ceiling.

1	↑1	↓2	↑2	↓1	PUC 421
2	↑2	↓1	↑3	↓2	PUC 412
3	↓1	↑3	↓1	↑2	PUC 381
4	↑2	↓1	↑3	↓1	PUC 241
5	↑3	↓1	↑2	↓2	PUC 401
6	↓1	↑3	↓1	↑2	PUC 523

Sleep deprivation chart indicating how many hours up and down for each prisoner.



Dramatic reenactment of overhead shackling.



Dramatic reenactment of dog use at Guantanamo.

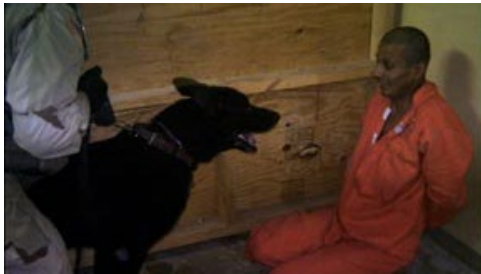


Photo of dog use at Abu Ghraib. Other photos indicate bitten prisoners and blood, with Charles Graner and Sabrina Harman sewing wounds.



Tim Golden's two-part article in the New York Times, based on a leaked Army investigation.

In Bagram as well as Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, whatever practices were originally sanctioned or suggested soon got out of control. Tony Lagouranis, MI in Iraq, says in the film that he used muzzled dogs in interrogations, but as another speaker, Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, former Chief of Staff to Colin Powell, puts it:

"Take the example of Rumsfeld's memo and say, look, he said the dogs have to be muzzled. Well, that's a man who doesn't understand the military on the ground. Because when that E6 is sitting there with that muzzled dog and there is absolutely no impact on that person being interrogated, he's going to take that muzzle off. That's reality, that's human nature."

Alberto Mora, former General Consul to the Navy, describes such a spread and expansion of torture in terms of a phenomenon called "force drift," in which interrogators exert ever greater increments of force to get desired results.[11] Citing a specific example of force drift, Tim Golden describes how sleep deprivation was effected at Bagram:

"...the previous unit [of MIs] had generally limited [sleep deprivation] to 24 hours or less, insisting that the interrogator remain awake with the prisoner to avoid pushing the limits of humane treatment. But as the 519th interrogators settled into their jobs, they set their own procedures for sleep deprivation. They decided on 32 to 36 hours as the optimal time to keep prisoners awake and eliminated the practice of staying up themselves." [12]

*Taxi to the Dark Side*, as well as *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*, *Standard Operating Procedure* and *The Road to Guantanamo*, all examine one or a few abusive situations in detail. The advantage of this documentary strategy is both to gain empathy by focusing on specific individuals and also to detail the particular circumstances surrounding the abuse and the abusers, especially the circumstances of the soldier on the ground. However, only *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* and *The Road to Guantanamo* also look at the experience of torture from the eyes of the abused. *Taxi to the Dark Side* effectively uses the crime against Dilawar to broaden out to examine the chain of command and the larger issue of what torture entails. The film also repeatedly returns to this one specific instance of abuse so that we look at Dilawar's situation, and that of his captors, with new understanding each time the film circles back to Bagram. Gibney said that Golden's articles on Dilawar's death inspired his film, which seems to be more about finding those ultimately responsible for his death than it does about the life of an ordinary rural Afghani living in a time of war. As a documentary, *Taxi* uses this narrative structuring in an artful and informative way: widening circles around a central departure point, but it is limited in how much it tells us from the Afghani point of view.

## *Taxi to the Dark Side's* visual style

Although I discuss the torture documentary's emotional aspect in greater detail in regards to a later textual analysis of *Standard Operating Procedure*, it is also important to acknowledge *Taxi to the Dark Side's* visual art. The film incorporates a variety of emotionally suggestive visual material to reinforce the arguments about torture that its authorities advance or that its witnesses explain on the basis of their own experience. In particular, the film uses dramatic reenactments to depict torture techniques, close-ups on texts to highlight ideas and words, and shots of Dilawar's family to heighten pathos. From the archive, Gibney draws on photojournalism, both photographs and video, already coded to elicit empathy with Iraqi and Afghani prisoners; other times "photo-op" stills of political figures stand in ironic contrast to what's being discussed on the sound track. Finally, the film is edited around the recurring image of a Bagram prison cell, showing shackles and chains dangling from the ceiling, from which prisoners were hung by raised hands. The recurrence of this image elicits ever-greater horror as the narrative circles back to it and as we know more of the background of torture, especially at Bagram.





Alfred McCoy writes on the CIA and torture, especially its developing psychological torture.



Cloonan speaks about the most effective interrogation techniques, based on rapport building.



Mohammed al-Qahtani's treatment in Guantanamo, dramatic reenactment. [\[Click here to see more images of this reenactment.\]](#)

*Taxi to the Dark Side* won the Academy Award for best feature documentary in 2008. Certainly much of its accomplishment lies in the range of its issues it addresses and its interviewees' explanatory power. However, it also integrates a wide range of visual styles that might not be remembered as much as its argumentative force. Although Errol Morris was widely criticized for using dramatic reenactments in *Standard Operating Procedure*, *Taxi* also uses them, including reconstructions of the Bagram prison and a recapitulation of the infamous Mohammad al-Qahtani interrogation at Guantanamo, from which a detailed log of torture tactics survives. [13] Al-Qahtani was reputed to be the missing twentieth hijacker who presumably would know about future terrorist attacks planned for the United States. Donald Rumsfeld was personally involved in his handling, and when he was taken to Guantanamo, his torturous interrogation lasted fifty-four days straight. He was subject to many other abuses, including being in an isolation cell for three months under constant blinding light. [14]

*Taxi to the Dark Side's* depiction of al-Qahtani's imprisonment is particularly innovative, shot in black and white, often with stills or slow motion, and with overlaying words from the interrogation log. In fact, the reenactments in this section may have inspired Errol Morris' extreme-close-up dramatizations in *Standard Operating Procedure* (although Morris uses such visualizations across his oeuvre). In *Taxi to the Dark Side*, often these images are spare and symbolic, such as an extreme close-up of a man's eye and ear with a female whispering into it; the word WHORE is printed on the screen between them. Or a close-up of a man's shoulder and head as he lies on the ground face down, wearing a collar with a leash leading offscreen, is overlaid by LOG PAGE 47: DOG TRICKS CONTINUED. At one point, al-Qahtani is taken to the hospital for hypothermia since the air conditioner was turned so high; to represent this, one image shows the prisoner shivering on the ground, clinging to a small blanket, a small figure against a white background, with the words: LOG PAGE 53: THE INTERROGATORS REMOVED THE BLANKET AND TURNED AIR CONDITIONER BACK UP. Understanding the details, often grotesque or gratuitous, of al-Qahtani's torture plays a crucial role both in the film and in our understanding of how torture tactics were developed. Guantanamo is, as an intertitle puts it, "the laboratory," and what happened to al-Qahtani, according to Alfred McCoy, "contains within it the entire genealogy, the entire history of CIA torture over the last fifty years."

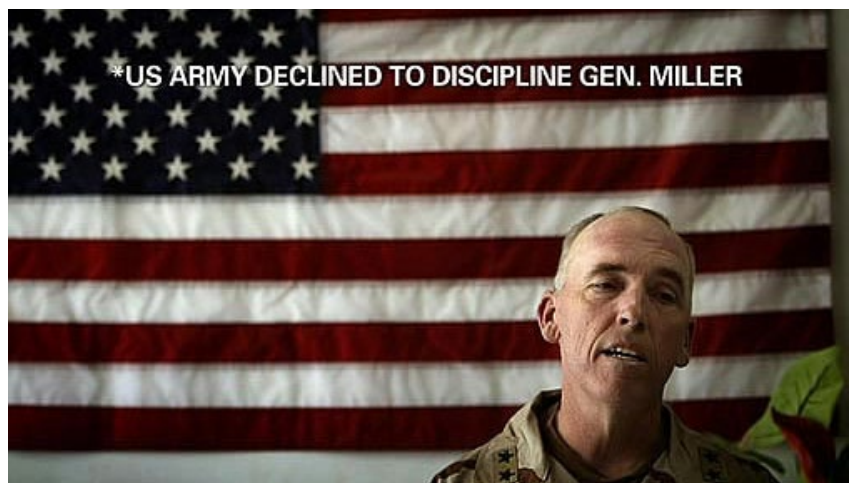
Also to illustrate the interviewees' points, Gibney selects well from numerous images by photojournalists, often shot for ironic effect. Frequently in such photos, the journalist has capitalized the distorting powers of a wide-angle "fisheye" lens to emphasize power differences. In one such photograph, a short, hooded man wearing a suit and standing outside a shop seems to have been recently arrested; the picture is shot from a ground level angle, as U.S. soldiers take his jacket off and a large machine gun looms in the left foreground while the other soldiers stand by.



In another image, with a viewpoint steeply angling down, we see a boy and man with bandaged foot huddle in a corner as the man looks up to the soldier, whose side and large gun barely enter frame left.



With more direct commentary from Gibney, a newsphoto ironically frames General Geoffrey Miller, commander of detention facilities in Guantanamo and Iraq; Miller's small head and shoulders appear in the lower right corner against a backdrop of a huge U.S. flag hung behind him that takes up the rest of the frame; superimposed is US ARMY DECLINED TO DISCIPLINE GEN. MILLER.



Sometimes these ironic photos are of national leaders, such as the silhouetted Condoleezza Rice and Dick Cheney in an ornately furnished, elegant, red-toned White House room shown as the soundtrack tells how the Bush administration twisted laws and treaties to its own ends.





Or a newsphoto of Donald Rumsfeld presents him standing at his exaggeratedly large desk working in his office, while the sound track reads what he wrote on a memo about interrogation techniques,

"However, I stand for 8-10 hours a day. Why is standing limited to four?"



Rumsfeld's standing desk. [Click here to see more photojournalism](#) used for ironic effect, especially in relation to the soundtrack.

At this point the reproduced memo is shown, with a close-up on his penned words.

Gibney uses a wide range of video material as well as photography from photojournalists and videomakers accompanying the troops. Most of these are shots of the Afghani and Iraqi people, especially those taken into detention. The images selected show roundup procedures, including shackling legs and arms with zipties, the faces and postures of the detainees, and details of the locales where they are taken. One medium-shot shows a detainee pushed down on the street, gun in his ribs, with his artificial leg by his side; another close-up focuses on a man's hands ziptied behind his back; a label affixed to the ziptie identifies his status.



Another poignant video clip shows a man facing away from us, hands ziptied behind him, as he stands by the small concrete cookstove behind his house, a common utility area in so many modest homes throughout the world.



Within the film, photojournalists have already framed such images with social commentary in mind. Sometimes they are shooting with irony and other times with empathy for the occupied people. Many times news gatherers compose their images to demonstrate power relations and structures of authority. By using the previously artfully-composed images of photojournalists, Gibney can make political points, borrow the images' emotional impact, or set up his own ironic contrasts in an astute way.



In terms of visual style, the film also incorporates many close-ups on the written word, chapter headings, superimpositions identifying speakers, and inserts of onscreen text to make key points. Two of these moments occur early in the film. *New York Times* reporter stationed in Afghanistan, Carlotta Gall, heard about deaths in Bagram prison and followed up on them, finally tracking down Dilawar's family after an extensive search. She visited them with a translator and they showed a piece of paper they had received along with the body:

"... and that's when I opened it up and read it. It was in English and it was a death certificate from the American military. And it was signed by a U.S. Major, a pathologist. And there were four boxes [for cause of death] and she ticked the box for homicide. I said, my god, they killed him. And we had to tell the family. I said, do you know what's written here? They said no, it's in English, we don't understand.... And the pathologist had said it was due to blunt force trauma to the legs..."

As Gall speaks, we see both images of Dilawar's family and close-ups of lines in the U.S. coroner's report. With this story, Gall indeed had a journalistic coup in early 2003 (The Abu Ghraib photos would not appear on CBS and in the *New Yorker* till April-May, 2005). However, the *Times* sat on the story for a month and then buried it on page A14, running it on March 4, 2003 under the headline, "U.S. Military Investigating Death of Afghan in Custody." [15] Two years later, after the *Times*

Still from video showing recently arrested prisoners, composed to elicit sympathy for them. [Click here to see more images of prisoner roundup.](#)





Carlotta Gall



It was available at Bagram but nobody had time to consult it.



Dilawar's daughter and grandmother.  
[Click here to see more lyrical images of Dilawar's home, which bookend the film.](#)

received a copy of the U.S. military investigation into crimes at Bagram, only then did they run an extensive article that included a backward look at Gall's findings. (This article, by Tim Golden, was one of the main inspirations for Gibney's film.) Other textual inserts in the film include lists of torture techniques; John Yoo's infamous definition of torture as leading to organ failure or death; individual words such as "habeus corpus" or highlighted words such as "nod-and-a-wink"; coversheets of manuals and documents, such as the CIA's 1963 *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual*[16] or the *Army Field Manual for Intelligence Interrogation*; and copies of fliers passed out to Northern Alliance soldiers advertising \$5,000 bounties for captured prisoners. The effect of the onscreen text is to elicit a kind of pause in viewing, an invitation to reflect on rhetoric and its social genesis and effect. In particular, because the material to which the text refers is also being discussed on the sound track, the effect of *seeing* an original document adds to a sense of historicity that the film is trying to convey. In addition, just as Gibney often uses press photography and video for ironic effect, he also uses the images of these words to the same end, since the logic of many of these documents is to define torture out of existence, especially in terms of U.S. culpability.

Finally, in visual terms, one of the key elements of the film, repeated in various ways throughout, is MP Sgt. Thomas Curtis' little drawing, made at the request of investigators right after Dilawar's death. They asked Curtis to draw how Dilawar had been shackled. The drawing is reproduced several times in the film, including as it was published in Golden's 2005 *New York Times* article. In addition, a reproduction of the detention cell, with handcuffs hanging from the wire mesh ceiling, is also shown repeatedly, as are some dramatic reenactments of overhead shackling. To reinforce the importance of such a torture tactic, as the film introduces Carlotta Gall, we see her hands playing a tape of General Daniel McNeill, Commander of Coalition Forces in Afghanistan, 2002-2003, explicitly denying such shackling exists. In the film's spiral of revisiting the Dilawar story, Curtis' drawing accrues metonymic emotional force.

Finally, the film is book-ended with lyrical images of Afghanistan as the camera people visit Dilawar's family and his grave. Toward the end of the film, the family members relate their grief as we see them gathered in their home, with Dilawar's three-year-old girl sitting in her grandfather's lap. With grave sadness, his brother poignantly says he cannot "taste anything" since Dilawar's death. These intimate images, also seen in the section with Carlotta Gall, lend the film a sense of being in touch with the everyday life of Afghans affected by the war. However, the shots of Dilawar's family do little to inform us of the political circumstances of Afghani life but are used more for their connotative power. They contrast with the film's depiction of U.S. militarism and policies gone awry and thus are used in both an elegiac and utopian way.

## Bagram prison now

Regrettably *Taxi to the Dark Side* will not lose its relevance for a long time to come. Bagram prisoners do not have the protections that President Obama promised detainees in Guantanamo.[17] After the Supreme Court decision in June 2008, *Boumediene v. Bush*, which ruled that Guantanamo detainees have the right of *habeus corpus*, the U.S. government stopped sending prisoners there and directed them to Bagram instead. The population of Guantanamo went from around 700 to 250, while the population of Bagram prison went from around 300 to over 600. In addition, the government is building a new Bagram facility that will hold over 1,000. [18] This is in addition to a highly secret CIA prison known as the Salt Pit, located north of Kabul. Bagram currently holds prisoners taken there after years in extraordinary rendition as well as those captured in Afghanistan like Dilawar was,



A rare photo of Bagram prison. Secrecy surrounds the Afghan prisons controlled by the U.S..



Aerial view of the CIA's Salt Pit prison, north of Kabul.



Gibney filmed the tribunal room in Guantanamo, but Bagram prisoners so far cannot look forward even to this kind of military tribunal to state their case publicly, with legal representation.

often turned in by Northern Alliance warlords for bounty.[19] And although senior Pentagon official for detention policy, Sandra L. Hodgkinson, says all "Department of Defense" detainees at Bagram have access to the Red Cross, nothing at all has been said officially to acknowledge CIA detainees there or at the Salt Pit. Reports are that the conditions in Bagram are worse than Guantanamo, and it is clear that prisoners' voices from there have been effectively suppressed.

However, in one of the most significant ongoing litigations around detainee status, a Federal court case was initiated by the International Justice Network during the Bush Administration asserting the *habeus corpus* rights of four Bagram prisoners, who had been taken to Afghanistan by rendition and who had been imprisoned there without counsel for over six years.[20] In January 2009, Justice John D. Bates of the D.C. District Court, invited the Obama Department of Justice to reconsider its definition of "enemy combatant" in light of its pronouncements about Guantanamo and rejection of that label describing prisoner status. In response, the Attorney General's office wrote a meager one-sentence refusal, "Having considered the matter, the Government adheres to its previously articulated position." [21] That is, the Bush lawyers previously argued that the United States could legally hold prisoners, then conveniently labeled "enemy combatants" instead of POWs, outside the country and outside the law.[22] Sadly, in the Obama administration, the defense lawyers hold to the same arguments as before about the prisoners the U.S. holds in custody abroad. Fortunately, Judge Bates ruled that the D.C. Court does have jurisdiction, since it is not ruling on prisoners taken in Afghanistan, who might be considered POWs (although the government does not, in fact, give them that status, which would grant them Geneva Convention protections), but on those who were taken to Bagram Prison from other countries.[23] So as this case and others like it move through the courts, *Taxi to the Dark Side* will have continued relevance as it points to issues we must face with the buildup of prisoners accompanying an expanded war in Afghanistan.

I wish to note here, as I revise this essay, further developments in the case I describe above make clearer the government's adamant decision to deny Bagram prisoners *habeus corpus*, including the right to an attorney.[23a] The passage of time will mark more and more such actions taken in this ongoing struggle. Even when no end to U.S. torture policy is in sight, understanding the scope and implication of the many issues adjudicated in the Bagram detainee case remains important for those concerned about justice. We have to name where torture is practiced, who experiences it, and what it consists of—and not let the government do it for us. As we conduct this war over meaning in public space—in books, on the Internet, in classes, and in the press—*Taxi to the Dark Side* sets out the issues in a concise and compelling way.

[Go to page 3](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

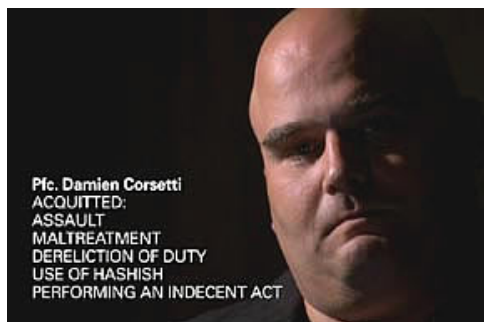


# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Authorities and torture epistophilia

Images from *Taxi to the Dark Side*



Damien Corsetti offers his perspective on what happened at Bagram.



Lawyer Clive Stafford-Smith represents a number of Guantanamo prisons. He and other lawyers had to wage a long legal battle even to see them.



John Yoo calmly defends the President's authority as commander-in-

All the torture documentaries considered here make extensive use of interviews. Most use interviews from people who were MPs or MIs at Bagram or Abu Ghraib prisons. Three—*Taxi to the Dark Side*, *The Torture Question*, *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*, and *Torturing Democracy*—use voices of authorities and voice-over narration, with *The Torture Question* and *Torturing Democracy*, both made for PBS, using the voice-over narration as their major structuring device. *Taxi to the Dark Side* and *Standard Operating Procedure* give a voice to interviewees who were actual participants in or witnesses to prisoner abuse; they are shot respectfully, often dramatically lit against a dark background. The films elicits empathy for them, many of whom had gone to prison or were demoted or dishonorably discharged for their crimes. Presumably they agree to appear because the filmmaker gained their trust and they now have the chance to tell "their side of the story."

*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* and *Standard Operating Procedure* both focus on the abuses first brought to our attention by publication of the shocking Abu Ghraib photos. However, *Standard Operating Procedure* does not open up to the "larger" issues by using authorities, as *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* does; instead, it focuses on the circumstances behind the images and ways of interpreting the photos themselves. Some of the authority figures seen across a number of these films include contrastive analyses by Alberto Mora, General Consul to the Navy under Donald Rumsfeld, an early high-ranking legal opponent of "enhanced interrogation techniques," and John Yoo, Office of Legal Counsel, Department of Justice, who wrote numerous briefs giving legal support for the infamous torture memos, in particular a long 81-page legal opinion expanding justification for those same "enhanced techniques."<sup>[24]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) I am interested in the fact that Yoo agrees to speak in many of these films even though he knows he will be cast as a villain; and in each film where he appears he consistently presents his ideas in a quiet, measured, and logical way. His presence gives these liberal films the impression of fairly presenting the other side, unlike the films' use of television news excerpts showing figures like Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld speaking. In those excerpts from TV news, government officials are represented in their own words in order to convey the voices of liars, megalomaniacs, and obfuscators.

Other explanatory interviews, which are intended to represent the filmmakers' perspectives more directly, come from scholars, such as Alfred McCoy, and journalists who have devoted much of their recent career to exposés and analyses of official U.S. involvement in torture, such as Mark Danner, Tim Golden, and Jane Meyer (who was also a consultant to *Torturing Democracy*). Lawyers interviewed include Mora, Scott Horton, Lawrence Wilkerson, Gita Gutierrez, and Clive Stafford Smith (the latter two are lawyers for Guantanamo detainees). The experts' voices are interwoven with the narration to present a relatively cohesive discussion within the documentary about an issue such as chain of command, the government's defining torture (away), specific techniques such as waterboarding, CIA involvement, or U.S. history, often since 9/11. In terms of the PBS films that rely on narration, Frontline (PBS) documentary filmmaker Michael Kirk's *The Torture Question*, although released in 2005, maintains its relevance today because it focuses on the chain of command that led to abuses.<sup>[25]</sup> In fact, those documentaries that open out to the wider issues surrounding torture all focus upon the way the Bush government and military officials covered up the chain of command, the details of which are laid out now in documents released by the Obama administration, filling in the gaps of what scholars, journalists, lawyers, and filmmakers could only intuit before.

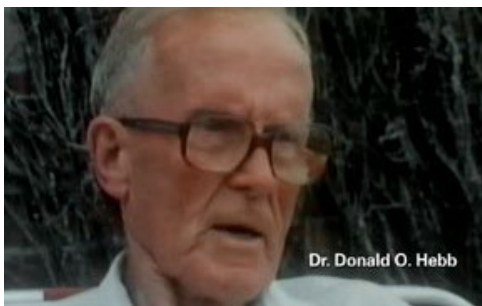
chief.



Gita Gutierrez represents Mohamed al-Qahtani at Guantanamo.



An example of how the government releases official documents with so much "redacted" or blanked out.



Donald Hebb did studies on sensory deprivation as part of his research in behavioral psychology.

I focus on this aspect of how information is presented in the documentaries because it points to "torture epistophilia"—an historically unique aspect of the torture documentaries as well as of the larger public discourse in the United States about torture since the publication of the Abu Ghraib photos in 2004.[26] By torture epistophilia, I refer to the thirst for knowledge about official U.S. support of torture. To that end, reams of documentation have been published, in books and on the Internet and continue to come out, about this issue. To give a specific example, here I am writing an omnibus article about six films on the subject. To do this, I have 25 books in front of me, about fifty articles printed out from the Internet, at least 250 stored on my computer, and access to a "links" article I did earlier in *Jump Cut* on the Abu Ghraib photos.[27] In addition, many of these books and articles detail how many pages of reports and interviews their authors studied to write their syntheses. When Tim Golden published his groundbreaking article on Dilawar's murder at Bagram, he had access to a 2,000 page leaked file of the Army's criminal investigation into the case. Philip Gourevitch, who along with Errol Morris wrote the book accompanying the film *Standard Operating Procedure*, based the book on transcripts of the interviews done for the film ("more than 25 times the length of this book"), interviews and depositions from the Army's Criminal Investigative Division, and many other documents made available thanks to journalists and "leakers." Senator Carl Levin's 2008 *Report of the Senate Armed Services Committee*, "Inquiry into the Treatment of Detainees in U.S. Custody," released in its unclassified, complete version in April 2009, is 232 pages long with 1,800 footnotes, based on the testimony of 70 people and more than 200,000 pages of internal government documents. And the books on the subject are often also dense and long. *The Torture Papers*, edited by Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua Dratel, came out in 2005 and contained 1249 pages of documents gotten through the Freedom of Information Act; many of the later journalistic "revelations" could in fact be found in this book, but perhaps its scope made it daunting to read thoroughly.

What is the relation of all this to the documentary films about torture? Well, they are a short way to sift through all this information and come to an understanding of the situation in about ninety minutes. The viewer may gain only a provisional understanding but it's a beginning. In the United States, for many important reasons, "torture epistophilia" has led to an ever-expanding generation of documents and investigations, with no resolution in sight. And what would resolution consist of? A truth and reconciliation commission, trials against government officials? What would finally let us know, and mourn and move on? In the meantime the continued publication and analysis of more information continues at an explosive rate. Furthermore, among the documents themselves, many contradictions exist and many officials have testified in a way so as to put themselves in the best light. In one of the interviews published on the website for *The Torture Question*, Mark Danner explains the many investigations into Abu Ghraib abuses after the photos were published:

"The investigations themselves—there are a dozen of them depending on how you count—are a fascinating exercise in bureaucratic damage control. Anyone who wants to read these investigations can learn an enormous amount about what happened at Abu Ghraib, about what happened in Guantanamo, about the abuse of prisoners. One can read the statement of detainees, how they were abused. One can read descriptions in the Fay-Jones report and the Schlesinger [report] as well, very intricate descriptions of the kind of tortures that were applied. ... You get a different message if you actually read what's in the report from what you get when you actually read what the investigator concludes in the executive summary.... There is no investigation that looks at the entire chain, that looks at the question of how policy, how what people decided in bureaucratic and executive officers in Washington actually determined what happened on the ground at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, Bagram and so on. .... If Americans read these reports, they'd discover a couple of things. One is that the abuse was much more thoroughgoing and systematic than they had been led to believe. That is, we're talking about



Hebb had volunteers isolated in a state of sensory deprivation...



...with goggles, blinders, earmuffs, and gloves.



They became extremely disoriented and hallucinated within three days. Note how the hooding is repeated across U.S.-controlled prisons, and the goggles used with Guantanamo detainees.

beating that happened day after day. We're talking about systematic use of sexual humiliation. We're talking about systematic use of stress positions—and this is handcuffing people with their hands behind their backs up on a window, very painful things; systematic use of dogs to threaten detainees; beatings of such an extent that people are beaten into unconsciousness. This is in the reports, that kind of abuse."[28]

I cite Danner at length because he points to how we have relied upon, and must rely upon, interpretations of this mass amount of data. Documentaries, especially "serious" ones such as these, belong to what Bill Nichols calls the discourses of sobriety—legal, political, academic, ethical discourses. Such films are shot and edited for an argument; they investigate, interrogate evidence, explain, try to keep some elements from the past from slipping into oblivion. The films, especially those that use a traditional documentary form, endeavor to uncover something or get testimony from others who did, find causal structures, and finally tell a coherent moral tale. It is possible that in contemporary times, viewers crave such moral coherence as the torture documentary might offer, to create closure on a painful subject.[29]

In fact, that's the usefulness of these documentaries, and what makes them stand apart from the news, which not only flows by us with its everyday presentation of death and casualty, both domestic and foreign, but which also elicit our spectatorial filtering strategies that we have developed both in relation to television and the Internet. We know in advance what interests us and what we want to "let through." Such strategies may sadly also keep viewers from seeking out these documentaries on DVD or the Internet. We've narrowed what we will look at. In addition, there seems to be too much information about torture. And it is a painful subject to pursue. Darius Rejali, author of the historical compendium, *Torture and Democracy*, made such a problem clear to me when I went to hear a lecture. He wittily introduced his talk with this comment, "Coming to hear me on one of your free evenings is about as enjoyable as going to the dentist." [30] Researchers and writers on torture, and the filmmakers who take up that topic, know that their very subject matter filters out potential readers and viewers. In terms of cinematic viewership, for example, people who choose not to see a film on torture may think torture is a terrible aspect of U.S. policy that happens without their consent, that they cannot do anything about, that its reality has to stay outside of what happens to them. The act of seeing the film—going to see a torture documentary in the theater (and few people did) or renting one on DVD or viewing one online—is already a political act, indicating a certain kind of subjective readiness on the part of the viewer. This may include a readiness to look at atrocity, a sense of moral urgency, or, as I indicated above, a felt need to integrate ideas about this issue now.

Finally, in terms of torture epistophilia, these films often have a large web-based amount of documentation to accompany them. For example, the Torture Archive sponsored the film *Torturing Democracy*, and its website plans to include a searchable database of more than 7,000 original documents, running over 100,000 pages. In addition, many of the witness used as authorities in the documentaries have written books, maintain blogs, or otherwise have an active online presence. For example, Mark Danner, who recently leaked and wrote about the previously secret *International Red Cross Report on the Treatment of Fourteen "High Value Detainees" in CIA Custody* (Feb. 2007), maintains a website with the text of all his essays, and all of Tim Golden's pieces are archived by *The New York Times*. [31] To research the topic of torture is to take a tour of some of the most morally provocative writing of our time.

Limits on torture epistophilia





Water torture as used in the Inquisition.

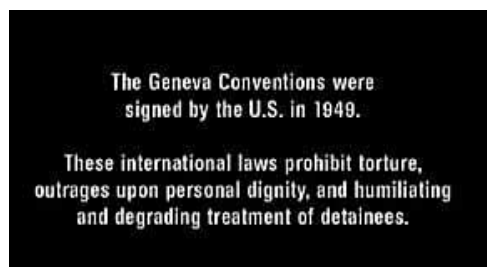


Tony Lagouranis, a witness in *Taxi* and author of his own memoir.

Images from *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*



Stanley Milgram designed an experiment in which people gave shocks of ever-increasing intensity to unseen recipients who screamed in seeming pain.



Feature-length documentaries have to edit to an approximately ninety-minute length. So a director's pursuit of knowledge cannot be replicated in the film. As a documentary incorporates voices of authorities, it needs from them succinct summaries of their idea, memory, approach, or position. In terms of public knowledge, as one who chooses to follow the "torture news," I am interested in what the current pursuit of knowledge on this topic includes and where it stops. Often without question the documentaries seen here rely on prevalent liberal cultural narratives about threat, religion, body, torture, law, history, and human rights. In public discourse, much of what appears in the documents released by the Department of Justice or to the ACLU through the Freedom of Information Act relate to U.S. *policy* decisions. In contrast, in U.S. researchers and reporters have had far less to say about the experiences, social structures, and history of the Iraqis and Afghans, including detainees. It is because he can rely on these liberal cultural assumptions—and limits to the pursuit of knowledge—that President Obama can so easily dismiss prosecuting the culpable with the admonition, "We must look forward, not back."

Furthermore, there's something peculiar about liberal torture epistophilia in the United States right now, the desire for ever more information and analysis without ever putting a punctuation mark to the topic, a kind of compulsive logorrhea that surely must stand as a symptom for a larger social disorder. Emblematic of the disorder is President Obama's release of so many legally incriminating documents with no further judicial process in mind. Of course, *Jump Cut* and I continue to advance such analyses but we must also consider to what end we do this, and if the outpouring of documentation itself could come to an end.

If torture seems a benchmark of what civilized society must reject, it is also clear that bodies are easy to hurt and torture appears regularly across history throughout the world. A moral response to torture, while necessary, is not enough. Part of the reason that the documentation of current U.S. participation in torture proliferates at such a rate is that that our responding to the realities uncovered by that documentation faces the barriers of political and economic realities in the United States, realities that leftists would summarize by the term "neoliberalism." Let me give an example: anywhere from 70% to 90% of the prisoners in Guantanamo, Iraq, and Afghanistan—held not as POWs but as possible suspects in the "war on terror" (formerly labeled enemy combatants)—are innocent, caught up in neighborhood sweeps after an attack. Because they do not have any legal rights, they have no course of action to gain their release. As President Obama expands the war in Afghanistan, this kind of mass imprisonment without due process will continue.

To give another example of the limits of the current public discourse around torture, while waterboarding and banging people against a wall may be eliminated from the torture repertoire, stress positions, sensory deprivation, sleep disruption, and solitary confinement probably will not. We know now that the detainees in Afghanistan and Iraq will not be given the rights of *habeus corpus* or legal representation won for prisoners at Guantanamo unless those rights are won by court cases pursued all the way through the U.S. Supreme Court. Furthermore, as Naomi Klein points out in one of the few analyses of torture that goes beyond promoting a struggle for human rights, moral outrage against abuse needs to look at the system that generates that abuse, in this instance, occupation by the U.S. military. Citing Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of French use of torture in Algeria, Klein writes:

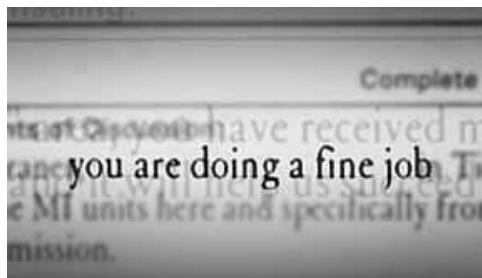
"... occupation could not be done humanely; there is no humane way to



Definitions and prohibitions are written into law and shape policy.



These definitions define us as a country.



Charles Graner, widely thought of as the villain in the Abu Ghraib abuses, received this commendation shortly after the worst abuses occurred.



He was imprisoned for ten years primarily because the photos entered public circulation and shocked the world.

rule people against their will." (126)

Klein's analysis in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* is one of the few that ties torture—in Chile, Indonesia, Argentina, Iraq—to a neoconservative economic mandate: that times of turmoil after a catastrophic event provide governments and capital their greatest opportunity to make "orchestrated raids on the public sphere."

"Shocked societies give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect."  
[32]

Klein explicitly ties torture to neoliberal economic goals of turning all of society into a market, including privatizing what government has provided or that belongs to the commons. Thus, the Iraq War provided the occasion for Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld to enact their long-held dream of privatizing the military. And there is a particularly damning instance of using the 9/11 catastrophe to encroach on former "rights":

"The Bush White House began planning for torture in December 2001, set up a program to develop the interrogation techniques by the next month, and the military and the CIA began training interrogators in coercive practices in early 2002, before they had any high-value al-Qaida suspects or any trouble eliciting information from detainees." [33]

As the Levin report indicates in its timeline of how torture policy developed, the very shock of 9/11 impelled the extension of national policy into directions of greater coercion and control, a policy tied to Cheney's doctrine of unlimited powers for the "commander in chief" in times of war. Michel Foucault might have tied this kind of torture research-and-development to the relation between power and knowledge in the modern state, with expanded power leading to and drawing from an expanded knowledge of how to control people by penetrating ever further into the smallest interstices of their lives. In this instance, the people that the administration turned to at this time for developing new interrogation techniques were two psychologists working as private contractors for the CIA and the military's SERE (Survive, Evade, Resist, Escape) program, Bruce Jessen and James Mitchell. Their directive was to reverse engineer the resistance training given to military personnel to help them survive capture. With no experience in the military, these men were and remain entrepreneurial behavioral psychologists, denounced by others in their field, both other SERE trainers and key members of the American Psychological Association. [34] That the government developed policy on such an important issue in this particular way makes the connections between catastrophe, torture, and privatization absolutely clear.

As torture epistophilia generates ever more documentation and analysis, that documentation is, of necessity, pared down and reshaped as it enters the narrative of a documentary film. Documentary viewers themselves are a self-selecting group, likely those who pride themselves on their pursuit of knowledge. Interestingly Klein's thesis may point to why many of these otherwise well-informed people might *not* want to see *torture* documentaries. In fact, there's a larger system that demands understanding and confrontation. For a viewer who does not have the larger picture in mind, the problem of torture may seem interminable and insurmountable. The kind of mastery that Bill Nichols attributes to documentary may not seem like enough mastery to motivate viewers to watch these films. But this hesitancy may also come from a sense that such a film would be "hard to watch," that is, that it would make an emotional demand. And so it is that I need to turn to another, inescapable aspect of the torture documentary, its emotional tone.

When considered from this aspect, it becomes clear to me that in considering the parameters and limits of epistophilia as it applies to subcategory of torture documentary, I have not adequately *defined* this kind of film, especially in its relation to the viewer. The torture documentary does not just condense knowledge about the subject and implicitly call us to action; it also provides a viewing experience that



Megan Ambuhl married Charles Graner, and her presence as a witness challenges the viewer to take her words on her own terms or to consider her actions in relation to his.

elicits strong emotions and an empathetic body response. Such a response has ties to other genres, especially pornography and horror. Most of the filmmakers under consideration here have dampened down potential voyeuristic fascination in favor of analysis, but some, especially *Standard Operating Procedure* and *The Road to Guantanamo*, have chosen to work with that response as part of a call to remembrance and activism.



Camp Ganci, the tent prison at Abu Ghraib, houses many thousands of Iraqis whose voices and stories have never been heard.



The Abu Ghraib photographs take on many different layers of meaning and circulation across the world, where they may be seen more than in the U.S..



IEDs not only inflict losses on the United States, but the perpetrators often send videotapes of such explosions to television. Viewers receive them as generic "insurgent attacks." Once seen, the specific incidents are largely forgotten within days.



In contrast, the stubborn, silent rubble speaks to lives whose loss and disruption are narrated only by family, neighbors, and friends—but for years to come.

[Go to page 4](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Standard Operating Procedure* [black border indicates snapshot taken by soldiers]



Morris said as he interviewed Karpinski for over twenty hours, she just became angrier and angrier.



Harman elicits an ambivalent response, especially since Morris and Gourevitch admire her...



## Part two:

### *Standard Operating Procedure*, the Abu Ghraib photographs, and *The Road to Guantanamo*: relations between knowledge and affect

#### *Standard Operating Procedure*: the witnesses, emotion, and the question of authenticity

In part one, I offered a close analysis of *Taxi to the Dark Side* to indicate some of the tools a more traditionally structured documentary might use to make an argument about an important social issue. In this case, the social issue—torture—is so amply documented that the torture documentary has as a main function not only delivering information but also providing a conceptual framework that viewers can use to organize the information about torture they constantly receive. These concepts are particularly important for socially concerned people who want to oppose torture but need to reinterpret the limiting rhetorical framework so often provided by politicians or the news.

Now I turn to a close analysis of a documentary made by a filmmaker noted for his innovative style. Errol Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure* has many of his well-known stylistic tropes—telling a story from different points of view, using dramatic re-enactments, letting interviewees speak at length, utilizing music, and engaging in visual flourishes such as extreme close-ups in slow motion. Significantly, many critics who liked Morris' other films disliked this one, some finding his visual and musical "embellishments" not appropriate for such a serious topic and others wanting a more postmodernist questioning of how we know the "truth." As he speaks about the film in interviews, Morris clearly has set himself two goals. First is to offer a media analysis of the Abu Ghraib photographs and second is to promote a kind of social activism, as evidenced in the topics he takes up in his blog and his publishing a book about torture with Philip Gourevitch. I am particularly interested in Morris' use of a cinematic strategy that has made other critics uneasy, his pushing of emotion in the film. In the next few sections of the essay, I would like to explore the implications of how he incorporates affect and encourages an emotional response, especially in relation to the film's focus on the Abu Ghraib photographs.

*Standard Operating Procedure* analyzes what's in and beyond the frame of these photographs that brought torture to the world's attention in 2004. To establish both the general environment and the Abu Ghraib guards' individual experiences, Morris includes in the film only interviews with those directly involved with or appearing in the pictures themselves. Here I refer to those interviewees as "witnesses," to evoke the sense that they not only speak directly to the camera, looking us in the eye via Morris' filming device, the Interrotron,



...in spite of this damning snapshot, taken by the corpse of Manadel al-Jamadi. Her thumbs up and smile are both the photograph's studium (an object of study that provokes further analysis) and punctum (a detail that wounds and pricks the viewer).



In her interviews, Lynndie England is also different from and perhaps more sympathetic than...



...her former self. Again, the film asks us to consider her in a more complex way than our original response to the photo may have warranted.



Megan Ambuhl Graner speaks about herself but not about...

but that their memories, rhetoric, and public personae are filtered through their prepared and delivered testimony at over a dozen military tribunals and at their own or others courts martial, as well as numerous media appearances and news interviews. In the process, they probably developed a version of events that they came to believe and prefer. In addition, they are filmed against the same prepared background, dark around the edges and blue-grey in the center, in a way that indicates they are speaking in a time and place set apart from both daily life and military environments, so that they have had plenty of time to prepare what they might like to say. We do not know their motives for speaking with Morris, perhaps because he paid them. But most likely they also want to tell their own version of events to the broader world, and Morris does give them ample time to explain themselves. As a matter of fact, Morris uses much longer interviews with former Abu Ghraib guards and interrogators, as well as former prison commander General Janis Karpinski and forensic photographic analyst Brent Pack, than are characteristic of other torture documentaries. Morris' interviews are highly edited, with jump cuts, but they also include prolonged holds on silent faces so as to give us time to "read moods."

In watching and listening to the witnesses, I am constantly aware of getting a recycled version of events, but still, as with the photos, I stare at their images trying to figure out more about their subjectivity, then and now. They give, in fact, only brief glimpses into what must have been mixed motives, ambivalences, levels of awareness, and states of feeling. They speak often about having to dull all emotions and moral sensibility during their nightmarish posting at Abu Ghraib prison. For example, Megan Ambuhl Graner was an MP told repeatedly to "shower" naked prisoners but seems to have little sense of gender politics used against prisoners. She concludes about her time there,

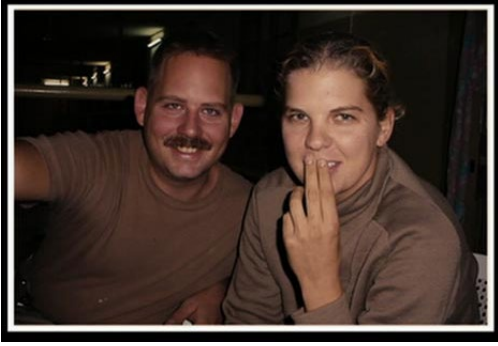
"You're taught from the very beginning that you have to follow your orders and if you don't, you're going to get in trouble. And if you do, obviously, you end up in trouble. You know, it's easy for retired colonels and generals and majors to say, 'Well these people should have known what were legal orders and they should have stood up to these lieutenant colonels and majors. They should have stood up to them at the time, in a war zone, where lives were at stake.' It's just kind of unrealistic to think that that would happen."

Because I know she married the presumed villain, Charles Graner, I stare at her face, trying to read it, trying to guess if she were more a villain herself or just a pawn. When I listen to Lynndie England, who has a child by Graner, talking about her time in the brig and watch her wry expression of ironic regret, I feel both more empathy for her and more "inside" her feelings, especially in these lines where her anger breaks through:

"When I was in the brig, every single woman there was in that brig because of a man. For different reasons, yes, but it was because of a man."

In his informative DVD commentary over the film, Morris says he wants to explore and convey what is behind but not seen in the infamous photographs, to listen to the people who took the photos, discover what they were like and what pressures they faced, what circumstances existed at Abu Ghraib. He invites us to join him,

"Try to imagine what was going on at Abu Ghraib at this time, with roundups of thousands of people and cellblocks with a couple of dozen MPs. By the end of 2003, there were over 10,000, a city. Endless roundups of mostly innocent people put them in Abu Ghraib with no opportunity to get out."



...her relation to the "villain," Charles Graner. If Graner could have appeared in the film, would we have reconsidered his role, too?



"...in the brig because of a man." A wryly ironic expression?



The central hallway as a crazy theater in one of Morris' famous detail-close-up dramatic reenactments.

"Try to imagine..." is the key phrase here, for as Morris marshals edited interviews, large-screen cinematic reproduction of the Abu Ghraib photographs, dramatic reenactments, and a concert-style musical score, he seems to have put that material together for emotional exploration and impact. For many critics, who have come to admire Morris as a "postmodern" documentarist, such emotional strategies seem inappropriate and inadequate to the subject matter, torture, and critics also decry that Morris uses witnesses' personal testimony uncritically. In contrast, Morris embraces expressiveness. He says he is trying to capture the nightmarish climate of the prison and the enactment of a sick theater at the "hard site," where most of the photographed abuses occurred. This theatricality became clear to him in an interview with participant Roman Kroll,

"Roman Kroll says he was doing all this because he knew the prisoners in the cells were watching. For the very first time I became aware that this might be some crazy kind of theater. That central hallway in the prison block was like a proscenium on a stage with the prisoners looking on. The hands that you see through the cell bars [in a dramatic reenactment] try to underline that moment ... and feel the power of that idea."

## Layers of evaluation in *Standard Operating Procedure*

Watching the witnesses in this film explain their situation invites layers of evaluation. First of all, the perpetrators of the atrocities look much different now than they did in the Abu Ghraib photographs, and we contrast their expressions while talking to us with the mugging or other actions they performed for the camera then. Second, we must constantly balance their sympathetic presentation in the film with the crimes we think or know they committed. The same issue comes up with the MPs and MIs from Bagram prison interviewed in *Taxi to the Dark Side*, but since *Standard Operating Procedure*'s voice track comes entirely from people connected to the Abu Ghraib photos, this kind of evaluation or "balancing" becomes an even greater part of the viewing experience, especially as the Abu Ghraib photos are often shown onscreen while witnesses speak.

The witnesses speak to the circumstances in which they found themselves. Tim Dugan, a contract interrogator with CACI Corporation, opens and closes the film by speaking over images of sunrise and sunset, talking about how he likes to see a certain flock of birds take off and return from the same place each morning and evening. Javal Davis, MP, describes the prison's inappropriate location in a combat zone, the Sunni Triangle near Falujah, which places it under constant mortar attack. General Janis Karpinski tells how Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld visits there with General Miller, who has plans to "gitmoize" Abu Ghraib:

"And then come the contractor interrogators and military people who had experience at Guantanamo Bay. They all arrived after Miller's visit."

Many of the MPs say they thought it was strange that detainees are kept hooded, naked, and in stress positions, but as PFC Lynndie England puts it,

"We thought it was unusual and weird and wrong, but when we first got there, the example was already set. That's what we saw. It was



"We thought it was weird and wrong, but the example was already set."

### Images from *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*



In this film the tortured speak.



Pitched camera angles and framing preserve anonymity.

ok."

Inexperienced, young, trained for police work but unprepared for custodial prison work, the MPs lived in cells themselves and followed the instruction of the MI interrogators to "soften up" detainees on the night shift for questioning the following day. The film invites us to imagine their everyday experience since it would be impossible to reproduce it. In the course of the film, they give detailed descriptions of several of the incidents documented by many of the photographs, in particular the death of Manadel al-Jamadi and the stacking of naked men into a pyramid and forced masturbation initiated by Charles Graner, a moment of abuse documented by various MPs' cameras. We follow this story of what happened at Abu Ghraib by listening to individuals' interpretation of their own experiences, their own roles. Lynndie tells of being in love with Charles Graner, a 20-year old pursued by a seemingly charming 34-year old man. Tim relates his role as an interrogator and what he's learned about getting useful information. Janis Karpinski speaks with fiery indignation throughout, both about prison conditions and her own demotion. We come to understand more of the story/ies behind the famous images but, as Javal puts it, the only big story that concerns the government is that something bad about the United States military has come to light:

"You can kill people off camera, shoot people, blow their heads off. As long as it's not on camera, you're ok. But if it's on camera, you're done. You know, torture didn't happen in those photographs. That was humiliation; that was softening up. Torture happened during interrogations. Guys going through interrogation ended there dead. And they were killed. And they died. That's where the torture happened, we don't have photographs of that."

Another film about Abu Ghraib, made more in the style of *Taxi to the Dark Side*, is Rory Kennedy's *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*. This film is distinguished by having as witnesses Iraqi detainees formerly imprisoned at Abu Ghraib at the time of the photographed abuses.<sup>[35]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Kennedy said that although it was hard to locate such witnesses, she had contact with the lawyer of six of them who were suing independent contractors who had interrogated them. These Iraqis agreed to appear in the film anonymously, fearing U.S. retaliation. To preserve their anonymity, *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* often presents these witnesses in extreme close-up, with a camera angle pitched up or down; we may see a man's forehead, eyebrow, and eye from a three-quarters view from the rear, or his lips and chin as seen from the front. Most tellingly, one of the Abu Ghraib photos contains an image of one of the speaker's brothers. He describes the circumstances behind what he sees:

"[Looking at a photo of a hooded man, shown onscreen] Oh, this is my brother, my older brother. [Tears in eyes] They used to bring him naked. His arm was injured. They made him hold buckets of water and run down the cellblock. I was ordered to watch him. Either confess to the charges or we will bring your mother and do the same thing to her. Yes, this is my older brother."

Again, looking at the famous picture of Sabrina Harman with thumbs up by a dead man, al-Jamadi, wrapped in plastic, another says of that moment,

"The most painful thing for the inmates there were the cries of the





Those who lack power understand how those in power act.



Who gets to say what an image "means"? The famous photographs take on new meaning...



...invested with personal grief. The photos function as international symbols of torture at the price of diminishing their original context, especially as the tortured and their families might interpret them.

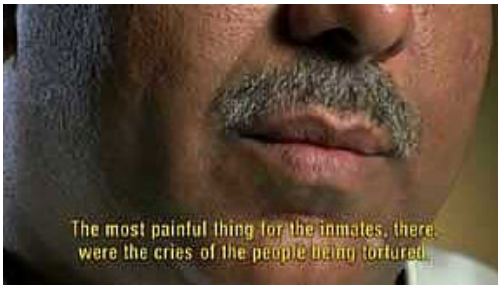
people being tortured. One day they brought sheets to cover the cells in order for no one to see anything. They began torturing one of them, and we could hear what was happening. We listened as his soul cracked. The sound of his voice really twisted our minds and made our hearts stop. We later learned that this man was Manadel al-Jamadi."

And finally, with tangible detail, Mudhaffar Subhi describes the general situation at the hard site on the night shift:

"In the night Graner would bring two or three guards and start torturing prisoners as if they were having a party. He would hang people by their arms in positions that are unbearable even for five minutes. The inmates would start crying. He would hang five or six in different positions. After about a half hour all of them were screaming together. Then he would walk by and say, 'Now, that's the music I like to hear.' They would make us listen to weird sounds either through headphones or a speaker. Every day they wouldn't let us sleep. At times they would get a few inmates, torture them, and let them scream till morning. That was on a regular basis, fifty nights with no sleep at all. Just hunger, abuse, harassment."

The importance of such testimony is that public guessing or investigating what's "behind" the photos has largely uncovered aspects of the U.S. chain of command, the CIA history of torture, and the testimony of U.S. witnesses such as those in this film. However, the photos, the subject of Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure*, and their documentation of the performance of torture take on a whole different aspect when the Iraqi prisoners can add their voice to the description of the scene. Torture epistophilia has mostly uncovered what's gone wrong with the United States, but that large body of documentation is incomplete both in terms of knowledge and feeling. In contrast to the U.S. legal system's norm of using only first-person, direct-witness testimony to adjudicate and punish crime, memories of and fury at torture long remain in the cultural memory of the groups who suffer it. In Latin America, for example, the voices of such groups are sometimes raised in *testimonio*, by speakers who represent a whole group and use a public forum to express their group's experience and point of view. In such an instance, the first-person voice is less personal than expressive of a "we." In our historical moment, however, few of the Iraqi and Afghani witness freed from U.S. custody who have experienced or seen torture first-hand feel free to speak in their own names and may avoid the press altogether. Interestingly, in preparing this essay, I constantly have had to go back to my notes to find the correct military rank or social position or first name of the authorities who speak in these films, but have only pseudonyms for the Iraqis in Kennedy's film. While I write this essay, then, I understand how the use of the proper name is politically charged, both in documentary and in critical writing. The effect of not remembering, using, or being able to use the proper names of the oppressed means barring them from public discourse and history.

Finally, in considering the voices of these witnesses, whom the films have presented with dignity and respect, what we think about them must be tempered and will continue to be tempered by extra-cinematic information. A book written by Philip Gourevitch, also entitled *Standard Operating Procedure*, offers a well-written, expanded account drawn from interviews done



These men respond to the cries of the other prisoners in a way that the soldiers have inured themselves to.



These Iraqi witnesses invite spectators to imagine a sound track for terrifying mute images.

from the film as well as other testimony and documents.[36] It deals with both the situation at Abu Ghraib and the larger political issues, including legal background and chain of command. Its chronology of what happened at Abu Ghraib fills in many more details about and from the witnesses who speak in the film. In addition, in their own voice, some witnesses featured in these torture documentaries have published books about their experiences: notably Tony Lagouranis, MI at Abu Ghraib, and Moazzam Begg, victim of extraordinary rendition, later taken to Bagram and then Guantanamo where he was held for two years in solitary confinement.[37]

Furthermore, other information is available about the witnesses, external to the film, which may inflect how we interpret the material in the films. Does it affect our judgment of the speakers in *Standard Operating Procedure* to know, for instance, that while in Iraq Lynndie England was officially reprimanded three times, fined, and demoted to private for sleeping with Charles Graner; or that another witness presented as relatively "innocent" by Morris, Jeremy Sivits, was a witness for the prosecution in the others' courts martial and thus might have learned to speak about the events in a self-serving way; or that Tim Dugan has been named as an abuser in a U.S. lawsuit initiated by former Abu Ghraib detainees against CACI, which provided contract interrogators there? To a certain degree, for me, such additional information does shade how I receive their voices now on re-viewing the film, but more it confirms my sense of contingency and provisionality in watching these talking heads. As witnesses, they have become historical figures, only temporarily arrested in the cinematic present as full-screen figures speaking to me in the first-person voice. Still I am moved by the emotional force of what they have to say and grant them, as we grant all witnesses whom we do not consider liars, the authority of their narrated memories and experiences, qualify it as we may.

[Go to page 5](#)

---

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

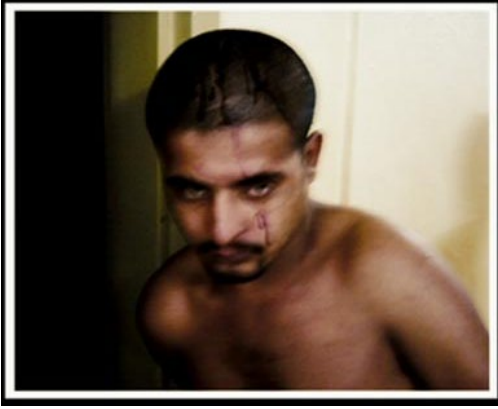


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

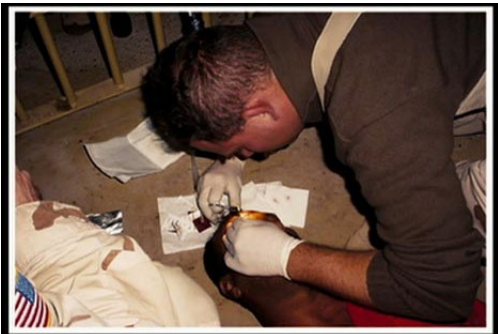
## The Abu Ghraib photographs



Images of agony end the film.



Images that shape history.



Studium: Graner stitching up a man's head.

*Standard Operating Procedure* not only interrogates these famous photos in terms of witnesses' reports, it also includes many other images from the soldiers at Abu Ghraib and frames and displays the images in an unique, indeed choreographed, way. In the next few sections, I would like to consider these photos as images as well as historical documents. As images, they are two-dimensional constructs with certain affective parameters, and these parameters depend both upon a viewer's own background and psyche and the social milieu in which s/he lives. Photographs themselves, especially snapshots, are often personal-historical documents that refer to a certain place and moment in the past. Most such images are not saved and their references known only to a few people for a temporally short period of time. (e.g., I know few of the people in my deceased parents' old photo albums). However, we can say of the Abu Ghraib photographs that they have entered and shaped history, although again, their impact may depend on where the viewer is coming from.

Let's be clear about it. U.S. journalists, lawyers, bloggers, and academics would never have investigated U.S. involvement in torture as we have over the last five years if it the Abu Ghraib photos had not been published broadly, especially in mainstream news venues. That we continue to know almost nothing about the many detainees held in Afghanistan is proof of this. The Abu Ghraib photos, almost instantaneously after their appearance on CBS and publication in *The New Yorker*, opened up a whole new historiographic space. They made history and they've shaped a history yet to come. They not only showed something irrevocably, but they made us as viewers *feel* something, with each person's spectatorial response varying according to personal background and social milieu. Even now the Abu Ghraib photos shape how a contemporary narrative about torture unfolds in the United States and across the world. We belong to the same political world that the images show. For we've seen no closure to the issues the photos raise, especially since the United States continues many of its same policies about torture, law and war.

However, viewers may not want to look at those images any more. In fact, many did not seek them out when first published nor would they seek them out in a film devoted to the Abu Ghraib photographs, like *Standard Operating Procedure*. Some potential viewers find the photographs too grotesque to gaze at voluntarily, too voyeuristic. At the same time, the widespread circulation of the images often ideologically reduces them to a predictable source of representative, summarizable notions about "abuse," "scandal," "prosecutable offenses" or "imperial power." In this way, as Roland Barthes might put it, most of the critical and legal analysis of the photographs has participated in what he would call a *studium*, a concern with the cultural, political, ideological, and interpretive context of the images. Certainly that is partly what Errol Morris traces in his film, a studium of the photographs explained by those directly involved their production. Such a studium that adheres to photographs was first defined by Barthes in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*:

"It is by studium that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes; for it is culturally (this connotation is present in



studium) that I participate in the figures, the settings, the gestures, the actions." [38] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



Punctum: fresh blood flowing red from the gash.



Stretched to the limits of pain: the image invites a body response.



Video shot with a cell phone.

If we choose to re-view the photographs, many of the Abu Ghraib images never cease to arrest us. Elements in the image strike us in a deeply personal way, with what Barthes calls the photograph's *punctum*. There's an element of the image, he says, that pierces the viewer like an arrow, wounds, pricks, cuts, leaves a psychic hole. [39] The punctum offered by the Abu Ghraib photos may come from the way many of them push at us naked bodies humiliated and stretched to the limits of pain, in compositions shot by soldiers who seem to have no sense that something is drastically amiss. In an unsettling way the photographs continue to have a capacity to elicit a semi-physical response in us that is at once familiar and repugnant. Viewers might respond to the photographs not only as the documentation of something that happened, as evidence, but as powerful images that use visual conventions that elicit an affective shudder. I would posit that such an affective response partly comes from the ways the photos and those taking them, often the same people orchestrating the scenes of torture, draw upon the "scenes" developed by other representational forms that provoke a bodily response, particularly horror—and its subgenres of splatter film and torture porn—and pornography. In addition, the recurrence of sexual humiliation in the images, and in torture itself, needs explanation, if only in a provisional way.

## Interrogating and responding to the Abu Ghraib photographs

In the section that follows, I would like to explore in greater depth how *Standard Operating Procedure* invites the viewer to interrogate and once again respond emotionally to the Abu Ghraib photographs. Unlike many critics, who repudiate Morris' use of heavily emotional elements such as dramatic reenactments and scored, concert-like music, I find his presentation of both the original images and his enhancement of them suggestive and respectful, perhaps legitimately restoring to the photos their original shock. In the style in which they are presented, the snapshots are demarcated from the rest of the film by a white border. They are usually framed large in the center of the screen, and are shown at length, from three to five seconds and up to as long as eight. (Anyone who has edited film or video knows how long that is to hold a static image on screen.) Furthermore, because Morris edits long passages of interviews with individual witnesses via jump cuts, he uses as cutaways some of the snapshot images (and less frequently video shot with a cell phone). Other times these images have no voice-over but are presented in clusters and combined with an extended musical theme. The film's central thematic treatment of the photos, then, shows the worst of the incidents, the building of a "pyramid" of naked men and forcing them into masturbation or simulated fellatio. For me, the cumulative effect of that central incident, combined with witness testimony and music, was the impact of mourning and grief.

In her review of the film, Caetlin Benson-Allott indicates the work the film requires of the viewer:

"*Standard Operating Procedure* .. positions its viewer to regard the Abu Ghraib photographs as multivalent fragments that occasion multiple stories rather than telling the whole story. ... The photographs are insufficient and require interpretation from viewers who may bring external impressions and motivations to the task." [28] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

To indicate the kind of processes that such a concerned documentary viewing



Needs interpretation: prisoner bitten by dog...



...and Harman learning to do stitches.



Graner recomposes the image to...

might entail, I incorporate into the essay here some of my own spectatorial responses to try to indicate lines of questioning or suggestions that the images open up, which partly depends on my knowledge external to the film (as with how I interpreted the witnesses above) and also on the way the film incorporates the images taken by the soldiers, which I call the "snapshots." Not only does my research inflect my viewing but also my experience of teaching both film criticism and video production, both in the United States and abroad. In addition, I have seen the film in the cinema several times and also numerous times on the small screen, including frequently pausing the DVD on my computer to log the witnesses' words, grab images, and make general notes of my own. So my analysis of viewer response must also depend for its effectiveness on the degree to which it resonates with viewers beyond myself.

## a. Snapshots of daily life

I am fascinated by how an early cluster of the snapshots gives a glimpse into the MPs' daily life and includes many images not previously seen in films or journalistic publication. In *Standard Operating Procedure*, accompanying Lynndie England's long speech about her relation with Charles Graner and her life in "a man's army" are images of the small cells in the prison that the guards occupied, with Lynndie supplementing her bunk with a colorful bedspread as a touch of femininity. (I observe myself wanting to think of her as Lynndie and him as Graner. She calls him Graner in her interviews, and he could not give interviews while in jail. Thus all accounts of the Abu-Ghraib photos characterize him as a cardboard, sadistic villain in a flat way.) We see images of the MPs from their first posting at Al Hillah in the first summer of the war, including video of them swimming and of Graner petting a small kitten they'd adopted. The unit's first posting was relatively peaceful, as Philip Gourevitch writes:

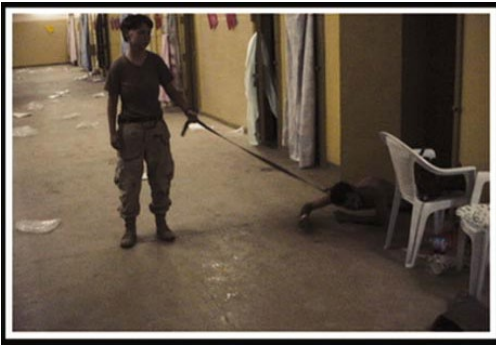
"The MPs felt safe walking the streets; they made friends with the Iraqis, played with their kids, shopped in their markets, ate in their outdoor cafes. The company's headquarters, in an abandoned date-processing factory, was minimally fortified, and never attacked." [41]

Later, not only was Abu Ghraib under constant bombardment, living inside the small cells must have been, for the MPs, a claustrophobic, hothouse environment. In that environment, Graner's sexual relations with both Ambuhl and England seems to suggest something of the concentration camp sexuality traced out in fiction film by Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* or Lina Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties*, which indicate both an ongoing sexual practice within the camps and its legacy years later. Part of the shock of the Abu Ghraib photographs comes from their sexual representation, however we interpret the sexual connotations of what we see, and our wonderment at the guards' participation in this milieu. In this vein, Anne McClintock describes the Graner-England relation and its visible trace in one of the most iconic, seemingly S/M, photos of a young woman soldier with a naked Iraqi man "on a leash":

"For Graner, persuading England to pose in his depraved theatrics flaunted his power to make her "do things." In the notorious photo of England holding a prisoner on a tie-down strap, Graner had choreographed the scenario, dragging the prisoner from the cell himself then placing the strap in England's reluctant hand. Photographing the scene bore double witness: to Graner's gender power over England and to his racial power over a humiliated, animalized Iraqi prisoner. He e-mailed the photo home: 'Look at what I made Lynndie do.'" [42]

The snapshots of daily life are fascinating because they are on a continuum with the snapshots of abuse. Sometimes they are photos to send home, sometimes





...include just England. Probably he also turned up the lights

male fratboy hijinks, other times memorializing, "this is what it was like." They may have had the future perfect tense of travel photography (a place I'm visiting which we'll talk about later)[43] or serve as a communal contribution to photos routinely shared with peers on base (what we are all going through). We see in the snapshots the routinization of daily life and the guards' participation in grotesque abuse—although grotesqueness is an attribute applied in retrospect. On the base at Abu Ghraib, a circle of people knew Graner's reputation as a photographer, and some came to him for CDs of his travel pictures, others for his trophy pictures, especially the ones that imitated porn. Much of this material is probably similar in content to pictures that circulated during other wars, with the photos of travel and daily life sent to family and photos of corpses and mutilations circulated among a smaller circle of mostly men, who could "take" looking at the stark visual realities of war.[44]

Judith Butler comments on a seemingly banal succession of such images captured by a digital camera at Abu Ghraib. To her, their seriality implies "a certain structure of ordinary life under conditions of violently imposed occupation":



A touch of femininity.

"Some of these digital cameras had files that include pictures of dead Iraqis, Iraqis being killed, murdered, raped, forced into sexual relations, and these are interspersed with photos of the local bazaar, friends smiling and eating, soldiers saluting the flag, views of the street and the neighborhood, Americans making love in apparently consensual terms, a soldier randomly shooting a camel in the head. So, in these instances, it would seem that the photos are a part of a record of everyday life, and that everyday life has to be understood in this context as consisting in a certain sequential interchangeability of such images."[45]

If the snapshots of daily life are new to most viewers of *Standard Operating Procedure*, they are a necessary counterpoint and accompaniment to the images of abuse and, of course, a counterpoint to the experiences of the prisoners who were held and tortured in cells very like the guards' but whose voices are still largely unheard.

## b. The murder of Manadel al-Jamadi

Of great importance to the film is the extended representation of Sabrina Harman and her photographing the corpse of Manadel al-Jamadi. She is the one participant in the abuses whom Morris and collaborator Philip Gourevitch go out of their way to exonerate. Not that they want to flatten out her behavior and motives solely to her desire to act as "forensic photographer," but that is one role they assign to her, especially since it used to be one of her career dreams. Within the film, we see close-ups from letters Harman writes to her wife Kelly saying she takes pictures because otherwise no one would believe the "shit" the United States is involved in.

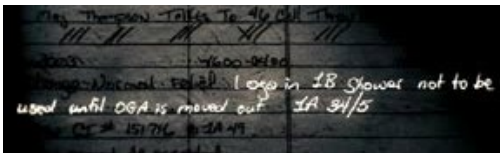
Al-Jamadi was killed, probably by a CIA interrogator and his translator, during an interrogation in a shower; he was hooded and hung by his wrists from a window behind his back. His corpse was wrapped in a body bag and iced down for a day till the officers could decide what to do with him. Finally they rigged an IV to the corpse and carried it out on a gurney, so the sight of a dead prisoner would not cause a riot. Harman went to the shower once with Graner to get a trophy photo, a famous one with her smiling and giving a thumbs-up,



One of the women sleeping. [\[click here to see more "domestic" images of MPs' life\]](#)



Javal Davis on torture in the shower: "Open the windows. It was forty degrees outside. Watch 'em disappear into themselves. For hours and hours and hours all you would hear screaming, banging, when they were done 8-10 hours later, when they'd bring the guy out they'd be halfway coherent or unconscious, put 'em back in their cell, you know, we'd be back for 'em tomorrow."



OGA refers both to interrogators and prisoners of "other government agencies."



Ghosts disposing of the corpse.

but later she went back and took over twenty more close-up images clearly forensic in style.[46] She said she did this to prove the MPs had been lied to, that there was a cover-up, and that al-Jamadi clearly had been murdered. But that thumbs-up photo with the corpse makes it hard to believe her.

To expand upon this incident, Gourevitch and Morris write a profile of Harman in *The New Yorker*, Jane Mayer writes about the it and the probable murderers, and Harman and her letters home explain it in the film.[47] Yet the punctum of the trophy image taken with Harman and the corpse, her youthful sunny face and her thumbs up in blue latex glove, persists in the minds of the viewers, including Morris himself as he writes a long article about that one trophy snapshot in his blog. This image, more than most others in the film, is one that Morris found to have hidden or bypassed the social reality beyond and behind the frame:

"Photographs don't tell us what was policy, who the real culprits might be. They can give us a glimpse into an unseen world but can also serve as a cover-up, can misdirect us. They can confuse us and they most certainly did in this particular story."[48]

For Morris, Sabrina's letters provide visual and textual evidence crucial to his film. Often close-up segments from the filmed letters will have words highlighted to emphasize something Sabrina is reading aloud. Morris says that having access to these letters is particularly important to him because they are written at the time the photographs are taken. In legal terms, they perhaps have the status of memoranda of record, notes someone writes up, for example, right after a meeting and sends to the other participants, which can function as evidence in court. For Morris, the letters approximate what might have been Sabrina's "original" state of mind. And he and Gourevitch write about the particular use writing letters and picture taking had for Harman while in Iraq:

"...as she described her reactions to the prisoners' degradation and her part in it—ricocheting from childish mockery to casual swagger to sympathy to cruelty to titillation to self-justification to self-doubt to outrage to identification to despair—she managed to subtract herself from the scenes she sketched. By the end of her outpourings, she had repositioned herself as an outsider at Abu Ghraib, an observer and recorder, shaking her head.... Harman seemed to conceive of memory as an external storage device. By downloading her impressions to a document, she could clear them from her mind and transform reality into an artifact. After all, she said, that was how she experienced the things she did and saw done to prisoners on Tier 1A: 'It seems like stuff like this only happened on TV. It's not something you really thought was going on. At least I didn't think it was going on. It's just something that you watch and that is not real.'"[49]

Because she is the (forensic) photographer of and (morally concerned) writer about al-Jamadi's murder, Harman figures large in Morris' cinematic treatment of this incident. But this incident and a later one, about building the naked "pyramid," are given even more elaborate development in the film, with witness testimony supplemented by dramatic reenactments, sound effects, and a developed musical score, reinforcing emotion in a sustained way.

First comes a dramatic reenactment about OGAs, other government agencies. The camera tracks down a long sepia-tinted corridor toward the vanishing point. Fronting the corridor are cells made out of bare board, presumably interrogation rooms with one-way viewing mirrors, into which ghost figures along walls gaze. We see these shadowy juxtapositions fleetingly in the hallway





as well as placards listing agencies that had interrogators there: Central intelligence Agency, Iraq Survey Group, Defense Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Foreign Government Services, and Task Force 121. As Javal Davis puts it, both these interrogators and their prisoners were officially ghosts, both often referred to as OGAs; the interrogators often made themselves known by only a first name, clearly fabricated, and did not log in their prisoners. As one of their spectral detainees, Manadel Al-Jamadi was thus not officially there.

Javal Davis narrates the kind of tortures that would be enacted in the shower room, and metonymic images show water streaming down from a showerhead and a face on the floor over which water streams down. Then close-ups from the prison log are shown, in negative with white print:

"OGA in 1B shower not to be used until OGA is moved out."

In this sequence with Davis, and later with Anthony Diaz and Jeffrey Frost, who took the prisoner down (he was hung from a window behind him by his wrists), there are numerous sound effects, as well as music. A common Foley FX "thunder sound" used to be made by striking a sheet of tin with a mallet; such a synth sound occurs frequently on the film's sound track and is heard when we see the notation in the prison log. The dramatic reenactments here also are accompanied by shower sounds, other FX like those in gothic films, and a synth choral tone.



Reenacted forensic photographs, here of the torn eye.

The visual style has echoes of a horror film but here it asks us to imagine real-life horror in a real-life dungeon. Through a translucent screen, we see the hanged body. The image is hard to decipher at first but we can make out other figures who pass by. Later there is an extreme close-up of the hanged man's mouth and chin with blood dripping from it in slow motion. Here and elsewhere in the film Morris exaggerates such gothic-style images by framing them with a skewed angle. And then later, as the MPs describe more about what happened to the body, there is a longer reenacted sequence, with ghost figures moving the body to the shower, icing it down, and shutting and locking the door.



The uncovered head.

At this point, Morris makes his debt to the gothic and horror conventions explicit. He is famous for using extreme-close-up, detail shots as inserts, often illustrating a word or idea from the sound track. In this case, after Sabrina's long narration commences, we see a dramatic reenactment of very large keys, in a starkly shadowed composition, turning with a click in a lock and then removed. Of course, this is Morris' indication that not only were Harman and Graner curious about the dead body but that she got the key again and returned for further image-making and a more forensic-style documentation. After more of her narration and images of the letters home, the gothic key in lock reenactment returns. Finally Harman concludes the section with these lines:



Sabrina framing the image. Cameras

"They tried to charge me with destruction of government property, which I don't understand. And then maltreatment, of taking the photos of a dead guy. But he's dead, I don't know how that's maltreatment. And altering evidence, for taking a bandage from his eye to take a photo of it? And then I placed it back. When he died, they cleaned him all up and then stuck the bandages on. So it's not really altering evidence, they had already done that for me. In order to make the other charges stick, they were going to have to bring in the photos. Which they didn't want—to bring up the dead guy at all,

taking pictures, and the click of the shutter are often depicted.



Sabrina's forensic photographs. The murderer is known but never charged.



Sabrina tells how a helicopter was shot down overhead just as the company arrived at Abu Ghraib. Morris characteristically uses reenactments to highlight a metonymic detail. [\[click here for more images of dramatic reenactments\]](#)

[or] the OGA, because obviously they covered up a murder and that would just make them look bad. So they dropped all the charges pertaining to the OGA and the shower."

No one has been charged with this murder although the perpetrators are known. CIA interrogator Mark Swanner and contract translator "Clint C." in all likelihood were responsible for al-Jamadi's death but Clint C. got immunity from criminal prosecution for his testimony and Swanner has never been charged.[50]

The dramatic reenactments I note here, as well as others used throughout the film, do not depart from an aesthetics of realism. Metonymic details enlarge on some aspect of the photos or some line in the interviews: flaming helicopter parts descending, a live grenade bouncing on the floor, falling playing cards designating high-value Iraqis, swarming ants on a prisoner's skin, blood on the walls, cell bars as framing devices, hooded men, naked men, men crawling on a wet floor, and snarling dogs lunging at the camera with teeth bared. But if the reenactments remain in the realm of metonymy, they are isolated details recast in skewed angles and extreme close-ups, pushed to become authorial commentary and expressive punctuation, conveying emotions of nightmare, fear, power and shame.

[Go to page 6](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### c. The worst night



Graner threatens a punch. Harman had written "I am a rapist" on the thigh of the man with pants pulled down.



Sivits cutting the ziptie threatening the prisoner's circulation.

The al-Jamadi section of *Standard Operating Procedure* immediately segues into the "pyramid" section, which relates the most horrifying incident that the photos and witnesses testify to. This incident generated most of the atrocity photos, including video shot with a cell phone, and its recapitulation provides the most pathos-filled section of the film, partly through the use of music and length and size at which the photographs are shown. This incident, as the multiple cameras on scene document it, contains the most sexual humiliation of detainees.

The section begins with a textual close-up from a prison log, "riot reported at Camp Ganci." It was a riot quelled with live ammunition. Witnesses in the film give two explanations for their particular anger at the detainees who were tortured that night—one from Javal Davis was about the seriousness of the riot and injury done to a female MP who "had her face smashed with a cinderblock or something like that," and the other, from Graner and Harman who said some of the prisoners had raped a boy. Both explanations are possibly true: Camp Ganci, the overcrowded tent prison, was of necessity scantily guarded with few MPs available to control the site. Canadian reporter, Doug Saunders, describes the conditions there in 2004:

"Former guards say the inmates were a mix of petty criminals, protesters, bystanders, members of the organized opposition and foreign fighters. Adolescents were thrown in with adults; some guards complained that the youngsters were being beaten and sexually abused. Frequently, the guards say, violence would break out, with rock-throwing incidents on an almost daily basis. The Red Cross report listed incidents in which live ammunition was fired from guard towers into rioting crowds." [51]

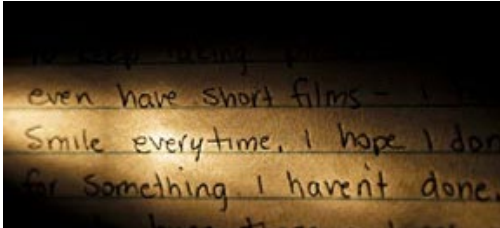
[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

The treatment of the detainees that night is first described by Javal Davis, who tells his anger and what he did. Then there is a long narration by Jeremy Sivits, accompanied by snapshots and video, as he explains how he used a knife he carried to cut the zipties on a detainee whose hands had turned purple and could have been lost. He's in the video, shown onscreen, and got a year in jail for that. Sabrina Harman took that video and photos of simulated fellatio, made a phone call, and then came back. Two images of this, with one man standing and one keeling, one putting his hand on the other's head, are each held about six seconds, with the music falling to silence at this point. Lynndie England describes the action and comments on the proliferation of photos, including taking pictures from the upper tier. We see many more photos and video taken by Harman, including video of Graner first making the "dogpile" and then the "pyramid" and then forcing the prisoners to line up naked against the wall and masturbate. Lynndie said Graner badgered her into posing with the "one guy who was still masturbating," that it would be her birthday present. At this point, the film holds for eight seconds on the famous image of her pointing her finger like a gun at the humiliated prisoner, cigarette hanging from her mouth.





Brent Pack



Sabrina's letter to Kelly.



CID (Army Criminal Investigative Division) forensic investigator Brent Pack goes over some of the same photos and additional ones to explain which camera captured what image. He describes the incident and the photos in this way:

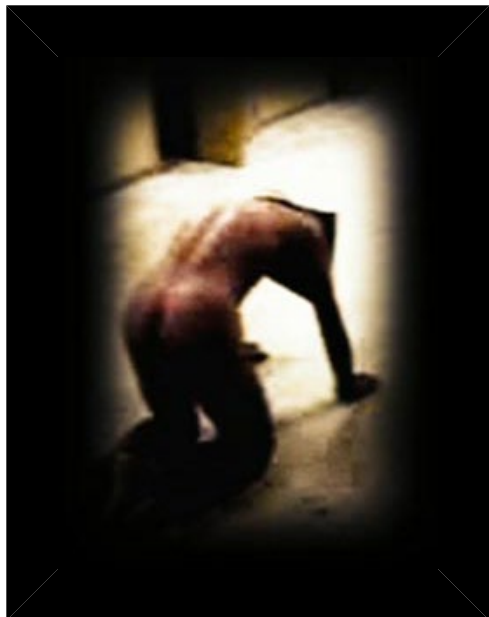
"This is the infamous seven-man, naked, Iraqi stacking. The facial expressions kind of set the tone for what they were thinking and the feeling at the time. You look into their eyes and it looked like they were having fun.... it's not so much that you're there committing these acts of abuse, if you're in the pictures while this stuff is going on, you're going to be in trouble."

Pack is the one who would testify as an expert witness in the MPs' courts martial as to which images depicted crimes and which depicted standard operating procedure, hence the title of the film. In this section of the film, however, Morris modulates Pack's opinion, which resonates with what other viewers of the photos might assume: the MPs look like they're "having fun." Concluding what I call the "pyramid" section of the film is a long sequence in which Sabrina reads from her letters to Kelly, and we see close-ups of her words there. Accompanying her reading are visual echoes of previous scenes, here reinforced by close-ups of cameras shooting and prisoners framed in viewfinders. The OGA ghosts, in superimposition, again throw al-Jamadi into the shower, and his corpse appears in Harman's viewfinder as do other images of atrocity. She reads from her letters home with a certain self-recognition about her role. However, her words are also disingenuous, since she's in the pictures in very compromising ways, and those pictures themselves will provide the proof to convict her:

"Something bad is going to happen here. ... We might be under investigation. There's talk about it. Yes, they do beat the prisoners. I don't think it's right, I never have. That's why I take the pictures, to prove the story I tell people. No one would ever believe the shit that goes on. No one. If I want to keep taking pictures of these events, I have to fake a smile every time....I guess reality hit and what was going on wasn't right. Of course, you know from the beginning, but it was your job and there was really nothing—. You can't just walk away and say, 'Hey, I'm not coming back.' I'm not doing this, because either way, you're going to get screwed."

## d. The music

These two sections—the al-Jamadi section with its dramatic reenactments, and the "pyramid" section, saturated with Abu Ghraib photographs and video—are heavily emotional in a way my verbal description does not do justice. Partly this comes from how the interviews and images are edited together in conjunction with a forcefully enunciated musical score that plays a prominent role in the film. In *Standard Operating Procedure*, music does not provide "background." Unlike in many documentaries, in this film the score by Danny Elfman is like concert music, with an original movement developing a piano melody that we hear in theme and variation throughout the film.[52] Various sections have their own tempos and themes as well, some with prolonged and sustained musical development. If I were to describe the overall style and aesthetics of Elfman's music here, it seems much like that of Philip Glass, with



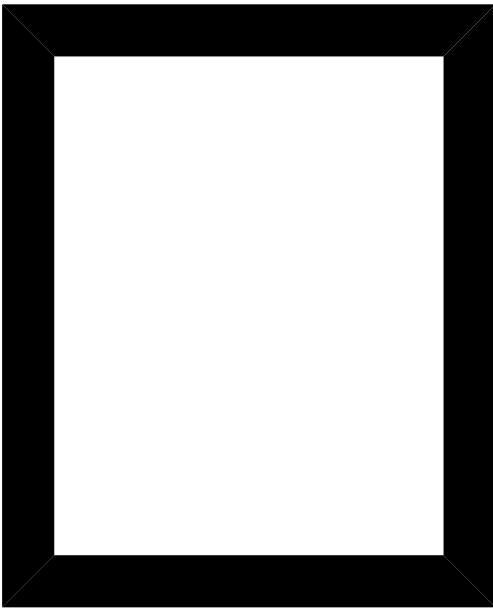
important differences. Like Glass, Elfman uses short melodic lines, up to sixteen bars but most often shorter, that return in variations.[53] In addition, throughout the film simple ostinato figures of two to four notes establish or double the beat, and these figures are often carried by piano or strings. There are few horn passages or crescendos across the film score, rather understated terminations of sections and melodic figures without discrete beginning and end. As with Glass, establishing these long, pulsing, repetitive musical lines can be seen as forward moving or mechanical or meditative, or for those who dislike this style, as producing "numbness." For me, the music's effect, especially in the pyramid scene, is to beckon the viewer to slow down to look at and emotionally react to, as if with renewed vision, the Abu Ghraib photographs.

In the al-Jamadi section, there is more use of synth and less harmonic music; the music combines with threatening sounds like crashing water or percussive crashing, prolonged with echo and reverb. When reenactments show an extreme close-up of the hanged man's face with blood dripping from it, we hear a two-step motif, with low strings and a bassoon on the one hand and very high pitched violins, on the other, the violins reminiscent of menacing music in horror films. Many sound effects are mixed in with the music, and when Sabrina Harman describes her picture-taking of the corpse, a repeated melody in the strings gives a dirge-like ending to this long, developed musical theme.

Sometimes the music is used ironically, as in the three-quarter-waltz beat that accompanies Brent Pack's forensic analysis to determine the source and time of each photo. In this section the music feel like a hurdy gurdy or calliope and conveys a sense of the mechanical. In contrast, at a later point, one of the most important in the film, Pack sorts the printed photos and stamps some (of sexual humiliation, not just nakedness) "Criminal Acts" and some (of stress positions and nakedness) "S.O.P."—standard operating procedure. Over this section, we hear the sounds of the rubber stamp as well as the opening piano theme and then full orchestral development of that theme. With such an orchestral treatment, Morris indicates the centrality of this official decision-making to his film, and we are intended, I think, to reflect on the ways that criminal investigations and trials will never do sufficient justice to the events as they occurred, both events recorded and those remaining unseen.

[[Click here to see how Pack sorted the images](#) and how they would be considered as court documents.]

If music amplifies feeling and once again makes the photographs "arresting" to us, then their representations of the stressed naked body and of sexuality make them even more so. Many writers have discussed the government's exploitation of what it considers Arab attitudes toward gender, nakedness, cleanliness, and sex, and Judith Butler, in particular, has offered a fine analysis of connections



between the depiction of homosexuality within the photos and the hypermasculinity promoted within military culture, all of which are part of the photos' "scene." [54] We know that taking photos was part of the mandated "softening up" of detainees with the threat that pictures would be shown to family and friends. Rather than continue this kind of analysis, I would like to look further at how these images work to provoke a certain spectatorial response.

In doing so, I turn to the use of psychoanalytic references, which have provided an invaluable tool to film scholars looking at potential viewer spectator positions and at genres which provoke a bodily response. However, these very references must come with a caveat, for I do not know what elements in a picture might provoke what responses in cultures dissimilar to my own. In this case, the cultural bias of using psychoanalysis as a reference may distance even further those who feel that the pictures themselves, and the dissemination of them—as Morris does in *Standard Operating Procedure* and as we do here in *Jump Cut*—are a mark of cultural disrespect. As a writer, and editor, I take responsibility for this and can only hope that the analysis that I offer is useful and taken as provisional, to be modified by others working in this vein.

## Torture, sexuality, and theatricality

It does not take Freud to make clear that the nascent torturer exists in every child. It only takes child rearing or extensive babysitting to see children beating up their dolls, enjoying bondage play, playing doctor (i.e., giving injections to or taking the rectal temperature of their dolls), and wanting to see siblings being punished, especially spanked. Not everyone remembers this aspect of their own life clearly, and certainly it is not widely discussed in literature on abuse. Personally, in a family with a Jewish mother, I remember seeing the *Life* magazine photos of the liberation of German concentration camps and hearing hushed stories between women about the Holocaust. At the same time, my siblings and I used to play with worms on the sidewalk, cutting them in half to see both parts continue to squirm. I understood explicitly the relation between what we were doing and what went on in the camps, but also knew very well that no adult I knew would acknowledge any parallel between us children and torturers. It was something that could not be said. However, in my mind, the same insight persists. Whatever social circumstances bring out or encourage human brutality, its origins may lie in our own ontology as we grew from child to adult. [55]

My play with worms as a child combined a child's preoccupation with body boundaries, pleasure in the impunity to inflict pain, and a forensic interest in







dying and dead animals. A story about Sabrina Harman's pet kitten suggests that she too had a child's interest in forensics. When her kitten at al-Hillah died, she "autopsied" it and then took photos of its detached head, which she decorated in unusual ways and placed in various locations. This seems like a childish—or childlike—form of physical curiosity, which may have set the stage for the later blend of abuse and documentation indicated in her photos from Abu Ghraib.[55a]

It is equally clear that torture often has a sexual component. Imprisonment and interrogation usually involve disorienting, controlling, and reducing resistance. To that end captors may seek to break down prisoners' personal autonomy, self-sufficiency and connection to others. The prisoner is thrown into special, abjected, hidden place, a cell, a darkened—often pitch black—room, historically a dungeon, where his/her body and mind are broken. In the Abu Ghraib photos he's seen as constrainable, destitute, and abject. (I use "he" here because that's what the Abu Ghraib photos show us; many women and children were in the prison, and tortured and raped. Their story is not visible in the published photos and has yet to be told. We imagine it.) By stripping male prisoners and putting women's underpants over their face, even before other acts of more painful physical torture or even more degrading sexual humiliation, the guards objectify and "other" them, setting them off as less than human, demarcating them as clearly "not like me," and using authority to negate their bodily integrity.



To a certain extent, prisons involve theater, with sets, roles, costumes, actors and scripts. This theater affects both jailers and detainees. It's an interminable script that the jailers enact to insure their power, reaffirm the validity of their often insecure identity, set clear boundaries between prisoner and jailer, deal with or suppress their knowledge of prisoners' rage, and establish their workday routine as sanctioned by authority. For the prisoner, prison immediately deprives him of his former social role. In this new place, someone else's script imposes control over the conditions of his life; the jailor sets his new reality. The script orchestrates a set of strategies or techniques, the aim of which is to induce in the prisoner fear and terror, disorientation and total dependency. With taunting and yelling, hooding and manhandling, the guards strive to induce feelings of worthlessness. One of the goals of such a theater is to induce psychic disintegration or allow personhood that only to the degree that it follows the script.

In this sense, the Abu Ghraib photos are echoed in mass culture in torture porn, which began with Eli Roth's *Hostel* in 2005. This genre focuses on captivity and performances of torture; it emphasizes torture's staging and the captives' anticipation of it. Gabrielle Murray has written on torture porn drawing on Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, and describes it as follows:

"Although interrogation is a feature in both war and thriller genres, films that fit within the 'torture porn' trend never represent it. Instead these films bring us face to face with what is routinely denied in the process of military, state and government sanctioned 'torture': the event is reduced to a cruel, clear dynamic of power relations. The victim's power is stolen from them through imprisonment. Then the victim's agency is annihilated by the process of torture—not just through the infliction of excruciating pain, but its anticipation and duration. In these films there is no attempt to suggest legitimization for the torturer's actions. They clearly display the fact that the torturer's pleasure is his or her





absolute power over the victim, events and situation. This sadistic pleasure is intimately bound to the torturer's omnipotent and omniscient power."[55b]

We know such scripts come not just from fiction film but from our government, where they are enacted into social reality. We see this kind of scripting, for example, in the CIA's Kubark manual (1963) that scripts scenarios such as "fear up" or "fear down," the orchestration of al-Qahtani's torture at Guantanamo and Abu Zubayda's at CIA black sites,[56] or the more ubiquitous use of behavioral psychology to gain desired behavior in high security prisons in the United States. The SERE program used in U.S. military training is theatrical, instructing soldiers in torture dramaturgy, their to-be-expected roles as prisoners facing abusive captors, and potential scripts of resistance that they can rehearse to develop strategies for maintaining personal identity and surviving capture honorably. An additional script enacted in Iraq comes from a much older theater of imperialism, in which the colonizers — who have authority, powers of definition, and proper names — script roles for the unnamed, racially marked masses of Others in an orientalist way.[57] Thus current prisons for "enemy combatants" utilize carefully crafted techniques to "handle them" and "soften them up," and these tactics assume certain Muslim proscriptions around nudity, sexuality, gender, cleanliness, and prayer. In the Abu Ghraib photographs, the torture is sexualized with these inflections. In the images of "stress positions," such an orientalist script stages the body before inflicting on it further pain.



In the section that follow, as I speak of the potential psychic structures and fantasies that viewing the Abu Ghraib photographs might resonate with or call upon, I do not wish to negate a primary moral response of repudiation and outrage. Rather I suggest that other layers of response are potentiated both by our media culture and possibly by our own psychic development from infant to adult. In particular, for those whose lives have been shaped by trauma, the reality of the pain inflicted on them shadows them for years after, as well as a sense of the irrationality and unpredictability of the social world. When someone has been treated as an object that's been manipulated, reduced, and forced — with the constant fear of death and dismemberment — they have a relation to the torture narrative and images, especially documentary ones, of torture that is far different from my own. Yet I also do not presume that their own narrations or response would simply articulate protest against abuse.[58] Those writing or making films about the aftermath of terror outline layers of feeling and complex responses, especially one generation removed. And they analyze the ambivalent, often contradictory responses to the images, narratives, and fantasies that real social violence engenders.[59]

Inflicting violence upon another's body may have several foundational causes. On the one hand, we all have anxieties about body boundaries, penetration of orifices, bodily fluids, and loss of organs, limbs, and capacities. Our very origins of a sense of self come with sensing and understanding our demarcation from the mother, a process explored by psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and Susan Isaacs,[60] and more recently by cultural theorists Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. Kristeva and Butler, in particular, posit a link between ideology and identity: that which we reject from our self-concept (as the masculine self-concept rejects the internalized feminine) is still part of us.







As a consequence, we may react negatively to and against a whole class of "abjected" beings to keep them safely Outside.

In the case of war and prisons, subjection is scripted in a particular way, especially for those who need to maintain a privileged voice of authority. When someone in authority, however, maintains power by abusing the *body* of the Other, such a treatment of the conquered, the already vanquished, has an excessive force that reveals the abuser's fears about the precariousness of his own identity and the validity of his role. In particular, and this reaffirms Kristeva's thesis, the abuser-guard reduces the prisoner's personhood by exposing and penetrating skin and orifices to abject this Other as a specifically feminized not-me. In this way, in the "pyramid" scene of the Abu Ghraib photographs, not only do we have evidence of the soldiers' masculine self-concept, but also the images reveal how Charles Graner staged the prisoners in a "homosexualized" way. Directing this kind of grotesque theater confirmed his adhering to his military role as well as carrying out the superior officers' presuppositions about what the MPs were supposed to do. In fact, shortly after this dark night of terror, Graner received written commendation for his work supporting military intelligence operations at Abu Ghraib. The very staging and enacting of torture establishes and re-affirms the captors' identity as U.S. military personnel, the role they need to justify their acts.



In her essay, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," Judith Butler addresses the framing and staging of the Abu Ghraib photos, saying that larger frame, outside the image, is the ever increasing effort of the United States to control the representation of its actions abroad, especially in the Iraq war. I would expand this "frame" to include the "shock doctrine" articulating the procedures and rationale for a corporatized security state, as analyzed by Naomi Klein. Butler's example of such framing is embedded reporting, to which the press has readily acceded. This orchestrating of access to the war exemplifies state power to impose its perspective on vision, delimiting what must not be seen or shown. Butler sees in such a practice

"...the performative power of the state to orchestrate and ratify what will be called reality or, more philosophically, the reach and extent of the ontological field....Currently the state operates on the field of reception and more generally the field of representability, in order to control affect, and in anticipation of the way that affect informs and galvanizes the field of war." (952-53)



In this light, the witnesses whom Errol Morris interviews in *Standard Operating Procedure* were not punished for abusing prisoners, for fulfilling the role the military expected of them, but for taking pictures "outside the ontological field." The real crime lay not in taking snapshots, which were in fact an integral part of the torture scene, but in the pictures' mass publication, their appearance on another stage, to be reinterpreted by numerous new viewers, who would bring to those pictures emotional and ethical responses of their own.

## A scene, a vision, a fantasy — elements of viewer response

When I first saw the Abu Ghraib photographs I was struck not only by the documentation of bodily abuse, including forced nakedness and simulated sexual acts, but by my speculation on the kinds of images these were and the kinds of image culture they could have emerged from. Rush Limbaugh saw in them fraternity-type hazing photographs and others called them trophy





photos, comparing them to the postcards accompanying lynching of Blacks in the United States.[61] The photographs also use tropes from pornography and torture porn and splatter films, subgenres of horror. And they elicit memories of the concentration camp photos from the end of World War 2.

Because of their consistent depiction of forced nakedness, the images stage a scenario of sexuality and power, a seemingly sadomasochistic scenario. It is easy to repudiate one's own emotional response to that scenario in the Abu Ghraib photos by seeing them as merely documenting abuse, but the images may also resonate with an archaic fantasy structure common in psychosexual development. Sigmund Freud's essay, "A Child Is Being Beaten," outlines how his patients create and use a spanking fantasy that has erotic force. For media theorists, this essay has been of interest because within the fantasy, narrator/viewer can identify with different spectator positions and in later life the fantasy is almost always articulated in the third person, as with actors on a stage. Freud mentions that the fantasy's origins lie in the common childhood perceptions that parents and teachers are physically stronger, that to see another child beaten is to be glad "it's not me," and that one might be the victim in the scene, with accompanying shame and eroticism. What makes the essay of interest in terms of media reception is that it posits an archaic triangulation of an image that offers a fantasy manipulation of being out of control and pain; gives both masochistic and sadistic pleasure; and elaborates a third-person narrative that can be embroidered, proliferated, and repeatedly consumed. What's often not discussed about media reception but which Freud's essay reminds us of is that images of torture often carry a frisson or emotional charge. However, in this case, because the photographs are also documents and evidence with the denotation, "this has been," they are not supposed to carry such an eroticized resonance. They are part of a dreadful reality. However, prison or "capture" imagery is often part of ordinary sexual fantasy, scripted in what Linda Williams[62] would call "numbers" in pornography, or used in s/m consensual reworking of such scenes. The sexual imagination often draws on stereotypical cultural scenes, and in the case of s/m it's within a theatrical, temporally bound scenario, from which its participants return to their customary social roles.



I am not saying that the Abu Ghraib photos are pornography, as some critics would say, since pornography's goal is erotic excitement,[63] and it seems unlikely that many people use these photos for that. I am saying that the images of abuse, particularly those with naked prisoners, elicit the frisson of the sex-power connection that is part of an archaic fantasy structure and that they draw on some of the tropes of pornography that probably guided Charles Graner in orchestrating his grand scene, enacted in part for the camera's eye. A pornographic orgy may portray a serial accumulation of bodies, buttocks, penises, bondage, and sexual activity. The sexual part metonymically and mutely stands in for an interpersonal, human act. In the same way pornographic imagery often revels in genitalia and butts, as if these alone led to the whole. In addition, in *Standard Operating Procedure*, the prison is a dungeon where power relations are racially coded and work themselves out in a sexualized way on the bodies of naked, abjected men. To consider how important muteness or very reduced dialogue and narrative are within pornography's conventions, consider how we would reinterpret some of the worst of the Abu Ghraib photos when the prisoners have a history, friends, a story, and a voice.





"Haider Sabbar Abed al-Abbadi kept his shame to himself until the world saw him stripped naked, his head in a hood, a nude fellow prisoner kneeling before him simulating oral sex. 'That is me...I felt a mouth close around my penis. It was only when they took the bag off my head that I saw it was my friend.' In the nine months he spent in detention, al-Abbadi says he was never charged and never interrogated. On that awful November night, four months after his arrest, he thought he and six other prisoners were being punished for a petty scuffle. They were herded into Cellblock 1A. The guards cut off their clothes, and then the degrading demands began. Through it all, al-Abbadi knew the Americans were taking photos, he says, "because I saw the flashbulbs go off through the bag over my head." He says he is the hooded man in the picture in which a petite, dark-haired woman in camouflage pants and an Army T-shirt gives a thumbs-up as she points to a prisoner's genitals. He says he was in the pileup of naked men ordered to lie on the backs of other detainees as a smiling soldier in glasses looks on. And al-Abbadi says he was told to masturbate, though he was too scared to do more than pretend, as a female soldier flaunted her bare breasts."[64]

If a pornographic imagination shapes prisoner abuse, viewers may recognize that convention, repudiate it, and still have other reasons for a bodily response. An important way that that photography and film generate affect in the viewer is by their depiction of human action. To see human action is to have a kinesthetic response, an aesthetic possibility early noted by Suzanne Langer in *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (1941). In particular, the stress positions in the Abu Ghraib photos evoke anxiety as a viewer imagines not only muscular pain and fatigue, but the suggested duration seemingly lasting far beyond the instant seen. In that regard, the extension of an interminable anguish beyond the image, felt in the viewer's own kinesthetic response to the strained postures, gives the images what Barthes would call their punctum, that arresting quality that invests the image with a particular fascination that "pierces" and overwhelms the one who sees. Vivian Sobchack writes about this sense of temporality and mortality in documentary imagery by indicating that such images do, in fact, suggest death, especially images that depict violence or show people taken close to death. Unlike photographing a corpse, no longer a person, filming and photographing violence, she says, has become for contemporary audiences "the active inscription of mortification":

"The inactive and unresponsive corpse, then, does not necessarily quicken us in our own lived bodies to an apprehension of dying and



death so much as does the active inscription of mortification on another human body."[65]

I would add that in looking at the photos of bodies in enforced stasis and stretch, because of the fear they induce about interminable duration, they have an ever-greater chance to implicate us in an arresting but unwelcome consideration of mortality. However, Sobchack continues in a way that lets us understand the very different function the photos had when they were taken and have now, circulated as part of a worldwide protest against a torture regime. Now, when a documentary film like *Standard Operating Procedure*, highlights the photographs, it orchestrates them to give them renewed meaning and affective charge. As Sobchack puts it, the documentary filmmaker's involvement in the social world shapes the film's framing and here its persistent gaze at mortification suggesting death:

"The contemplation of death in these films is ritually formalized as a moral consideration of the mortal conditions of the body, of the fragility of life, of the end of representation that death represents." (257).



If Sobchack speaks to the higher purpose of a documentary that deals with torture, the viewer of the Abu Ghraib photographs or of forensic photographs in general may see in them a fascination ordinarily conveyed by a much "lower" pop culture genre, the splatter film. It too deals with death, but not with the ethical gaze of the documentary film. In the splatter film, the very act of torture involves maneuvering to keep the victim alive while reducing his/her capacity for action, reducing personhood. Manipulating and tending the captive's body preoccupies the captor, binding both together in a sick, intimate relation. Death ends the relation and any "use" the captive has. Rather than frighten the spectator, the splatter film mortifies him or her as a witness to the vulnerability of the body. In viewing mutilation, spectators may oscillate between enthralled, victimized viewing positions and distanced, numbed ones. Writing about *The Passion of the Christ*, Robert Smart describes the hold this kind of representation has over many spectators. To me, this kind of spectatorship is elicited at well by the photos taken at Abu Ghraib:

"Splatter films dwell on the moment that the human being is reduced to mere inanimate—and in some cases—completely disorganized matter. This genre functions psychologically as a kind of cinematic Fort/Da game. The chief cause of anxiety gets rehearsed again and again, obsessively hoping for an eventual mastery of the fear that's engendered by a realization that the body and its functions are all there is. ....The body, in both its sexual aspect and as our intimate, fragile, physical manifestation of life







vulnerable to death—especially death of the premature and violent variety—has become the chief object of gore and porno filmmaking, with their admixture of pleasure, dread and ambivalence."[66]

Torture documentaries and well as the original photographs of torture and abuse thus partake of what Linda Williams calls body genres in cinema: pornography, horror and melodrama:



"...what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen."[67]

For all these reasons, rather than simply rejecting the actions that the Abu Ghraib photographs document, it is important to keep in mind the bodily responses that the photos elicit, the fantasy substructures the images resonate with, and the relation of codifications/ representations of power and abjection to our own viewer response.



In the next section, I turn from considering a theatricalized documentary, *Standard Operating Procedure*, to a film that uses more of the conventions of dramatic fiction, the docudrama *The Road to Guantanamo*. *Standard Operating Procedure* focuses on a close study of the Abu Ghraib snapshots and video. These images, presented large in a theatrical setting, are overflowing with an excess of signification that calls out for an emotional spectatorial response, a possibility that the film pushes with its extreme-close-up, "detail" reenactments and its sustained development of musical themes. In contrast, *The Road to Guantanamo* uses reenactments to add "realism" and elicit a political response. Director Michael Winterbottom draws on both low-budget, small-camera videowork and his own familiarity with Middle-East location shooting to convey a sense of what the locales of Pakistan and Afghanistan look and feel like. The film's dramatization has a tactile grasp of local details and a sensibility about local customs that many other torture documentaries or documentaries about the war in Afghanistan and Iraq lack. And the second half of the film, the dramatic reenactments of imprisonment at Kandahar and Guantanamo, shows the "ordinary" treatment of detainee in U.S. custody, not the "extraordinary," as seen in the photos from Abu Ghraib. In that way, the film suggests the need for activism around all detainee imprisonment, beyond combatting extreme torture techniques. The film indicates that the larger structures behind a prison like Guantanamo need to be politically addressed.

[Go to page 7](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

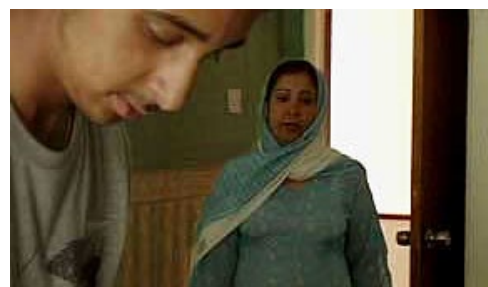


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

*Road to Guantanamo's* real-life narrators and the young actors who play them.



Asif leaving the UK to meet his future bride.

## The power of docudrama in *The Road to Guantanamo*

*The Road to Guantanamo* has a particular importance in the United Kingdom since far less information about British-intelligence collaboration with U.S.-sponsored torture has been released than documentation of torture in the United States. The 2004 release of three young British citizens from Guantanamo, largely through efforts of human rights lawyer Gareth Peirce, initiated human rights protests over British collaboration with U.S. secret detention policies and practices. Even today the UK enjoys less openness around such issues as does the public in the United States, where much more testimony about detainee abuse and "whistleblowing" has allowed journalists to publish ongoing fact-filled reports. After the three young men, known as the Tipton Three, returned home to their working-class, immigrant, Birmingham suburb, they worked with Peirce to create a 115-page document of sworn testimony narrating what they'd undergone in U.S. custody. The deposition's introduction lays out its form as a combined account:

"This statement jointly made by them constitutes an attempt to set out details of their treatment at the hands of UK and US military personnel and civilian authorities during the time of their detention in Kandahar in Afghanistan in late December 2001 and throughout their time in American custody in Guantanamo Bay Cuba. This statement is a composite of the experiences of all 3. They are referred to throughout by their first names for brevity." [68] ][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)



Shafiq leaving the UK after his friend Asif called from Pakistan



The real-life Monir disappeared on the ill-fated journey to Afghanistan.

In the document, the three describe many of the things that the International Red Cross also listed as happening against inmates in other secret sites—beatings, forcible drugging, prolonged shackling and squatting, extreme temperature manipulation, sleep deprivation, sexual humiliation, death threats to the prisoner and/or his family—often at gunpoint, forced shaving, keeping the inmates from



Asif phones from his Pakistan village where he's staying with his father: "Will you come to my wedding?"



Shafik, Monir and Ruhel fly to Karachi.



Asif joins them in the bustling capital where they enjoy themselves like tourists.

prayer, and desecrating the Koran. The youth say many inmates have been driven insane and there have been "several hundred" suicide attempts. However, they and Michael Winterbottom, director of *The Road to Guantanamo*, say their treatment was ordinary, since they were not high-value detainees. But what they do say about their treatment significantly coincides with what others have to say. In his groundbreaking article analyzing the leaked International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) secret 2007 report to the U.S. government, "The Treatment of Fourteen 'High Value Detainees' in CIA Custody," Mark Danner indicates one of the most compelling reason to accept the youths reports as fact:

"In virtually all such cases, the allegations made are echoed by other, named detainees; indeed, since the detainees were kept 'in continuous solitary confinement and incommunicado detention' throughout their time in 'the black sites,' and were kept strictly separated as well when they reached Guantánamo, the striking similarity in their stories, even down to small details, would seem to make fabrication extremely unlikely, if not impossible. 'The ICRC wishes to underscore,' as the writers tell us in the introduction, 'that the consistency of the detailed allegations provided separately by each of the fourteen adds particular weight to the information provided below.'"[69]

Because of the consistency of the Tipton Three's allegations, in publishing their depositions their lawyer condensed what they had in common to a third person narrative, organized chronologically, with first person voices entering in boldface in the text, adding the texture of memory, feeling, and experience. Both the third person and first person segments are replete with concrete imagery, but in the first person sections, the men remember past feelings and emotions, especially the sense of despair they felt as if whirling in an interminable downward spiral with no way out. Because of its particular organization, chronologically moving the reader along in a third person narrative, with personal perspectives expressed by an "I" adding another kind of tone, the structure of the sworn testimony reads like a novel. It has the rhetorical force of evidence combined with the familiar realist aesthetic of classic literary form, thus carrying the reader along in what it has to say. Also, for that reason, it also suggests a fiction film, which has characters (speaking as "I") and also the more objective view of the camera, documenting the world in which they move.



It's shortly after 9/11. The young me are joined by another cousin and decide to stay in a mosque to save money.



Low-budget, unobtrusive video filming let much of the dramatic material be shot in real-life milieus.

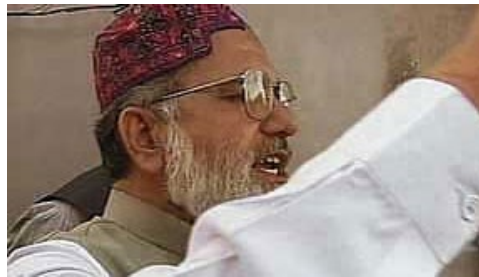
In fact, Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross did choose to make a fiction film, or rather a docudrama, about these three men, but not in the way I just mentioned. They used the deposition and did many more interviews with these young men before writing *The Road to Guantanamo*'s script, but then also used the three men, as they are today, as witnesses in the film, telling their story to the viewer alongside an acted version of what they went through. In addition, *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006, UK Channel 4) is a low budget film, with much shot in digital video. The directors had a budget of 1.4 million pounds, and could film efficiently because of



Winterbottom's familiarity with Pakistan, having made the feature, *In This World*, there in 2003. In addition, as Winterbottom put it, he could shoot the Afghanistan and Guantanamo prison scenes cheaply and safely in Iran. There he constructed a Guantanamo set, consisting of a few rooms, later using news footage to show the prison's exteriors and also to show the Afghan war.



They attend a rally where the emir exhorts an attentive crowd...



...to help Afghanistan.



The rally draws on archival video footage.

As it uses filmed witness testimony from the original Tipton Three and dramatic reenactments from young actors, who do not look like their now-older counterparts, *The Road to Guantanamo* narrates in chronological order what happened to the friends. In a style which relies heavily on narrative ellipsis, often omitting causal links, the film shows three young immigrant men, of Pakistani and Bengali origin and living in the UK, traveling from their home in the English Midlands to Pakistan and then to Afghanistan in September 2001, shortly after 9/11. Nineteen-year-old Asif Iqbal, (portrayed in the drama by Arfan Usman) flies to Pakistan to meet the woman his mother has chosen for him to marry. He calls back to England to invite three friends to join him: Monir Ali (Waqar Siddiqui), Shafiq Rasul (Riz Ahmed) and Ruhel (the deposition spells it Rhuhel) Ahmed (Farhad Harun). The four meet up in Karachi, Pakistan, where they stay at a mosque to save money and generally move about the city like tourists.



They decide to take a bus trip to Kabul to see the situation in Afghanistan and offer aid.



Dramatic sequences are played out in real-life locations in Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.



The road trip leads the youth to restaurants with unsanitary food and consequent sickness...





...which gets worse and worse.



On mountain roads, the bus climbs into Afghanistan.



The bombed out buildings scare them.



City streets are deserted.



In Kabul they do find the big nan they'd heard about.



Unobtrusive video shooting allows for greater discretion in capturing street life.



The youth try to take a microbus back to Pakistan but it goes north into war.

After about a week in Karachi, with Asif's cousin Zahid they go to Friday prayers at a mosque, where they hear an imam call for solidarity with the Afghan people who are now invaded and bombed by the United States. Setting off to Afghanistan to provide humanitarian aid, but with naiveté and a spirit of wanderlust, the fellows take a bus to Kandahar. Their mood changes when they arrive and see bombed-out buildings lining the road; in addition, there they face the consequences of eating fly-infested food and drinking the water. Arriving in Kabul, they wander about with nothing to do and are demoralized by sickness and no way to achieve any kind of humanitarian goal.



Location filming of men with rockets.



Northern Alliance or Taliban soldiers.



Stuck in the middle of nowhere, which happens to be the war zone.



Low-budget bomb blasts in the dark of night.



Burying the dead whose truck was bombed the night before.



All the inhabitants of the town hustle on to Taliban trucks, from which the youth are captured by the Northern Alliance.

Visual style: the seamless editing of archival and dramatic video



Intertitle comes up over archival footage of the border.

They arrange for a ride back to Pakistan on a minibus but board the wrong vehicle; their van goes north to Kunduz, a stronghold of the Taliban holding out against the Northern Alliance. There they are isolated, shown sitting by the side of a house in rocky, barren terrain; bombs from the front light up the night. Suddenly they evacuate the area, herded onto trucks with Taliban fighters. At this point, Monir disappears, his truck undoubtedly bombed. Along with many other men rounded up by Northern Alliance forces, Asif and Shafiq are handed over to U.S. soldiers and transported to Shebargan Prison. Briefly feeling relief when they can speak English to a U.S. military interrogator, they soon find themselves prisoners of the United States and treated ("packaged" in U.S. military jargon) in a way that has become familiar from many detainee reports. They are hooded, shackled with zipties, repeatedly subjected to anal searches, and airlifted to Cuba, where they are placed first in open-air cells at Camp X-Ray and then in interrogation cells at Camp Delta. The last third of the film gives a visual picture of what ordinary treatment Guantanamo consists of, with sensory deprivation, lack of exercise, forced shaving, no way to maintain cleanliness, and even more extreme abuse. Later, because of independent UK legal actions on their behalf and because they can prove they could not have been at Taliban rallies the CIA taped (according to their documented work history and juvenile criminal records), they are finally released.

Broadly speaking, the witness scenes present the three men speaking to the camera in a seriousness and matter-of-fact way, and the fictional scenes present the young men's impetuosity, confusion, and peril. In addition, constructed news reportage,





The acted newscaster's voice-off discusses aid workers pouring across the border into Afghanistan. This is either archival footage or footage that Winterbottom shot unobtrusively with a small video camera.

accompanied by visual clips of the war, the Middle East, and Guantanamo is woven into the fictional part. This news material both provides needed background information and narrative glue, and to an untrained eye it is integrated seamlessly into the story's flow. Winterbottom says he uses archival news footage because it incorporate many viewers' ordinary perspective on the Middle East; that is, viewers in the United States and Europe see the Afghan war via embedded reporting from an outsider's view. However, he never mentions in interviews that he scripted the newscasters' lines so as to advance the fiction economically. I myself did not recognize the scripted narration over the news footage on first viewing, but had my attention drawn to it by Stuart Klawans:

".... the film's third type of narration: clips of news footage, and studio-produced voiceovers made to sound like a reporter's off-camera commentary. This material is the glue of the movie, sticking scenes together with a layer of information or a gloss of authenticity. The reportage, both fake and real, thickens the emotion...It also adds a weight of objectivity to whatever you're seeing, no matter how subjective the underlying source." [70]



More unobtrusively shot video. The closer-in shots have more dramatic impact.

The combination of news footage, witness explanations, and acted scenes leads to a seemingly uninterrupted chronological accounting of the young men's trip. The various kinds of footage meld together with the use of match cutting and with flawless continuity editing. However, the dramatic economy achieved by smooth narrative ellipses also masks what for many viewers remains a vexing question: why would these fellows travel into a war zone and risk their lives? Mat Whitecross, who spent a month living with the three and interviewing them, said they mostly talked about the misfortunes that befall backpacker tourists, such as getting sick on the food, not knowing the language, or getting confused about which bus to take. On reviewing the film, I see more clearly how Winterbottom presents the youths' trajectory in Pakistan to allow for the viewer's layered interpretation of what they experienced and perhaps felt. At this point, I would like to take a close look at that section to analyze the film's style and its effect.



Archival footage of men on motorcycle...

Asif's friends' plane trip to Karachi takes just a few shots, ending on a close-up of the in-flight map showing how far the plane has gone. Here a diegetic insert provides a way to compensate for viewers' vague geographic knowledge in a discreet way, and indeed the openings of many documentaries often include a map. With the first indication of how the film will show us just what urban Pakistani life is like, we see the actors with their rolling suitcases moving through the crowded Karachi airport. The real-life Shafiq explains their destination: "We didn't want to stay in the hostel because we thought it would be expensive, so we went to a mosque." Periodically, the film imposes the dates of the action over a location shot, particularly important in this section because we want to understand the boys' timing and motivation, so here the date 5 October 2001 (read in relation to 9/11) appears over filmed footage of a modern bus going by a mosque, angle up toward the minarets. We then see the actors wheeling their bags through a busy commercial street, being welcomed at the mosque, and sleeping on the floor. The framing moves closer to show them wash before prayers, with numerous close-ups of their ablutions as we hear the call to prayer. Such shots emphasize not only the relation of cleanliness to Muslim religious observance, but also these close-ups of washing face, hands, and legs also resonate with the fact that after capture, the men especially suffered because they could not get clean. For example, when in U.S. custody, even when they did get a chance to shower, they did not have enough time for a quick soap and rinse, and so one of their strongest memories of prison is the stink.

A shot of them praying at the mosque segues into grainy news footage of a very large crowd with sounds of a street gathering. A (scripted) UK newscaster's voice gives the viewer needed background about popular political sentiment in Pakistan at that time:

"Crowds marching in Karachi today, organized by Pakistan Islamic



...is seamlessly edited to a dramatic image of one of the young men crossing the border on a motorbike.



The actor Shafiq crosses the border with many other people...



...and then is shown in medium shot greeting his friends, from whom he had been separated.

Visual style in the imprisonment sequences: stress and "customary" treatment by U.S. military captors.



Arrested in Kandahar and "packaged" for sensory deprivation.

parties that are supporters of the Taliban. It's one side of the political turmoil that seems certain to follow American military intervention in Afghanistan."

A number of elements are at work here. First, the newscaster has a very different accent than do either the adult men or the young actors, indicating the class nature and privileged observer-eye of news reportage. Second, in the news footage that Winterbottom uses over this voice, he edits from massive crowd footage to medium shots of men and boys raising their arms and chanting, and then to a close-up of two boys doing the same. This footage will echo with a later series of news-shots where an imam speaks to a crowd expressing similar widely held views.

The demonstration footage seamlessly segues into a long shots of the busy Karachi streets, with cabs and trucks heading toward the camera. We then see a variety of images showing the young actors doing tourist things in the city, such as shopping and taking rides at a theme park. Asif comes from his village to join them, as does a cousin. As the actors are shown sitting together in a restaurant, the older men's voices-over discuss their long-time friendships. One of the actors in the restaurant says he's been spending most of his time shitting. Toilets and food illnesses are repeatedly topics of discussion and are shown visually, as part of the film's gritty realism, including shots of fly-infested food. The fellows were there for about a week, and without planning, as Asif describes it,

"It was Friday prayers and we were walking past the mosque. A lot of people were going in, so we went in with them."

We then see news footage of an imam addressing a crowd. Not all of his words are translated, but subtitles give this: "The bombing of Afghanistan. This can only lead to chaos and terror." A close-up of the older Ruhel follows: "We were hyped and he was shouting slogans that..." His words are continued by news footage, including close-ups and long shots of men with boys raising their arms and chanting.

The older Asif continues: "The preacher was saying you should help Afghani people in whatever way you can, and also we was thinking of going over to see what Afghanistan is really like." After that, the actors sit in a crowded restaurant open to the street and continue their discussion of the upcoming trip: "...we're going, one, for the experience and, two, to help. And the food there, you know the nan (a flatbread), big nan." They all gesture with ever-broader spreads of their arms to indicate the size of the Afghan nans, and then wonder what languages might be spoken there. The older Asif says, "So we jumped on a bus then and off we went." His image segues into a close-up of the young men on the bus, one vomiting into a plastic bag.

In presenting the young men's experiences, the film uses this kind of dramatic ellipsis throughout. I describe this introductory section of the film at length because it seems so important to know what motivated the youth to take their ill-fated trip, yet there is a limit to what we can know. For example, they spent about six weeks in Afghanistan before capture and we really do not know what they did there. Because of his work in the Middle East, Winterbottom understands the differences in U.S. and European sentiments about "terrorism" and views expressed widely in the Middle East in the months following 9/11:

"You can never prove motive... They were teenagers, incredibly young, naïve teenagers. Maybe they were thinking, this will be exciting, it will be an adventure. What they say is that they went there to do charity work. They went to help out people who were being bombed, or were about to be bombed. ... I was in Pakistan at the time [the U.S. invaded Afghanistan]. I was in Peshawar, which is near the border, and everyone there at the time would have had that opinion, that it was your duty to help the people in whatever way you could. And I think that there's quite a racist assumption going on, which says, 'That's preposterous.' If you think about it, during the Bosnian War, a lot of British people went over there to do charity work." [71]





The sensory deprivation in Kandahar prison looks...



...much like that in Guantanamo.



Outside the cells, the Guantanamo sequences use archival footage.



Few showers and not enough time to soap and rinse.

Much of the first half of the film is shot with digital video, providing the sensory imagery and contextual knowledge that location shooting can provide. As Winterbottom puts it, the film gives visceral evidence for the men's account. The film shows different kinds of transport common in poor countries—busses, minivans, and trucks. It also includes longer sequences showing the terrifying transportation of prisoners: First it shows one of the men being trucked in a shipping container to an Afghan prison; at one point, the Northern Alliance machine-guns holes into the container to give the men air, but many are killed and only twenty survive. Later, we see the film's version of the captives' plane ride to Guantanamo, as hooded and sensory-deprived, hands ziptied behind their backs, they are strapped into at an unendurable position, neither able to sit upright or lie down. The video captures the specific locales of Karachi, Kandahar, Kabul, Kunduz, and the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, where the cameraperson walked through the streets or filmed from within a bus. Winterbottom said video let him constantly improvise with the actors to take advantage of the location, and the film benefits from his familiarity with local customs and how to get around. In addition to the film's rapid cutting, then, the image track gains in kinetic effect from capturing details of daily life, in particular, the jostling of people on the street with the camera often positioned for low or waist level shots to be even more unobtrusive in their presence.

The sequences in Guantanamo have a different visual style, being shot on set. Winterbottom originally wanted the young actors to stay "imprisoned" in cells for a while to experience what captivity in Guantanamo was like. However, the actors themselves could not stand shackling and demanded padding for their legs. The older men showed the younger ones the scars they still bore and said they often had to wear leg shackles for hours at a time. The worst of Guantanamo practices entailed being beaten while short shackled, which led all of the three men to confess. As shown in the film, short shackling usually consists of having the legs cuffed to a bolt in the floor with the prisoner bent over and his hands cuffed to the same bolt. In a torture sequence with strobe lights, the exhausted prisoner falls into various position, all of which produce more pain. In this way, the film uses staging and the tableaux vivantes that result from the strobe lights to show some of the worst moments the prisoners endured. In this instance, the staging has a powerful kinesthetic effect.

Finally, I think the effectiveness of the docudrama as a genre is that it does not flatten out individual experience as much as the documentary usually flattens out a witness' voice, especially when that voice is edited into a short statement in the service of an argument. *The Road to Guantanamo* is filled with many peculiar moments. The boys want to travel to eat those big nan, one misses a bus because he's shitting, one just disappears forever. The very title, *The Road to Guantanamo*, alludes to the Bing Crosby-Dorothy Lamour-Bob Hope "road" films, most famous being *Road to Rio* (1947), which has scripts filled with the characters' misadventures in an exotic locale. In the film and perhaps also in practice, interrogation procedures are illogical and inefficient, as if records or transcripts are not even kept. The young men are asked the same questions over and over, and at one point are told their images in photos and videos place them at rallies with bin Laden himself. After their parole and work records prove they were in England at the time, they are eventually moved into better quarters to hang out together, watch videos, drink sodas, and eat McDonalds and pizza. Before they leave, they are asked to work for U.S. intelligence and to sign a paper saying they've been detained there because they were linked to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which they refuse to do. On leaving to go to their plane, they hear admonitions such as, "Make sure you say that you were treated properly" and "Don't look out the bus window."

Such idiosyncratic moments return the witness testimony from the realm of evidence to the realm of experience. The film moves along with the unpredictability of daily life, as we observe it, with all its irrationality and discontinuities. In this way, Winterbottom's docudrama stylistically develops a kind of "realism" that the documentary often has to do without. Docudrama is not wedded to realism, however, since it can draw on any genre for its fictional aspect. Many docudramas are



Short shackling at Guantanamo: feet shackled to floor and then hands, all to same bolt.



Short shackled in the dark, loud noise blasting...



...trying to find a better position...

melodramas, a genre with a long history of capitalizing on social issues in the news, which it reformulates in moral terms often in a story about victimization. Furthermore, low-budget location shooting like Winterbottom's may have led him to shape the first half of his "real-life" narrative in a neo-realist mode, with more of an emphasis on documenting social milieus. Traditionally neo-realist cinema, following from literary naturalism, also tells a pessimistic story about victimization, and in some ways, we would expect a docudrama about men imprisoned in Guantanamo to proceed in this way. However, Winterbottom deliberately eschews such a narrative line, and his emphasis on the haphazardness and gratuitousness of what the men experience saves the film from melodrama or neo-realism's predictable tropes, emotions, and closure.

## Conclusion

When people hear "waterboarding" in the news, a very common, institutionalized rhetorical process has already shaped, indeed pre-digested, the concept for them. This one word summarizes a human experience, suffered by many across history, and now refers to policy decisions; the word's sensual residue provides a slight, but just a slight frisson. In the news, torture discourse, like war discourse, takes an issue of great magnitude, universalizes it—stripping it of context, and explains its course and processes with a gravitas and objectivity that's related to newscasters' and viewers' mutual assumptions about our collective right to know. Words like "waterboarding" or "stress positions" suggest a larger story, not explaining concrete instances but leaving it to the listeners' imagination to fill in the details.

Clearly it is important, and perhaps unusual, that we have all this *documentation* of torture—no such documentation is available for activists, lawyers, and former detainees in the UK.[72] But using those documents to speak for the oppressed still assumes a political agency denied to those so easily rounded up, detained and abused. As information about torture circulates within institutions that will publish it—more or less fully—news reportage, survivor testimony, and government documents all run the risk of being received in a way that reassures listener/viewer/readers of their safe distance from the "problem." For example, academics, lawyers, and medical people who deal with the topic of abuse have learned role distancing as part of their profession, which in any case places them securely in the middle class and authenticates a right to know, to examine with an objective eye. In daily life, most news viewers in the United States can absorb the story of torture within a flow of stories and not have to think about it later.

In addition, as the news or political leaders proffer such summary words like "waterboarding" or brief narratives about torture, the public discussion is rendered with deceptive temporal finitude and assurance. In this way, the torture "story" serves as a common, socially distributed narrative, which functions as all narratives do to give us a sense of closure and protection, a brief mastery over a distressing situation. Even current and potential legal procedures that could provide more definitive social closure—administrative decisions, legislation, commissions, and court cases—of necessity filter out much of what those who experience torture have gone through and the context in which such violence occurs. We cling to the possibility of a redemption narrative for both ourselves and for those who have suffered terrible abuse. We crave some kind of temporal progress, as if we could so easily, just by increasing knowledge, "put the past behind."

Even this socially reduced knowledge of torture is still too much for many media viewers to absorb. With the excess of images that surround us, many viewers think there's too much violence in the media and they flee from it to safer fare. For others, the violence of our ubiquitous primetime police dramas or action-adventure and horror films processes death and dismemberment through the reassuring tropes and genre predictability of fiction. Understanding torture, or not understanding it but trying to decipher something like the Abu Ghraib photos, means gaining painful



...but not escaping the terrible pain.



Hogtying: a punishment for unruly, often mentally disturbed prisoners.



Solitary confinement for not answering questions. The metal walls create a reflector oven in Cuba's heat.



Short shackled, with strobe lights and music bombardment...

knowledge and acting on it.

Gaining such knowledge, having it "stick," often means absorbing information accompanied by personal narrative and visual proof. This is how anti-slavery activists taught about slavery and rallied people to their cause within the Abolition Movement, where abolition meetings often included the visual, tactile demonstration of shackling and the testimony of a former slave, who would expose part of his/her body to show corporeal proof of past abuse.[73] Flinch or not, the meetings elicited a kind of pleasure and epistophilia both ways, with shame and shock at being a voyeur, and also not wanting to look but willing to do so within the context of gaining knowledge and acting on it. The torture documentary circulates within a similar field of reception, among activists or potential activists, many of whom really do not want to see torture. In writing about viewers who would turn away from the Abu Ghraib photographs, Susan Sontag chastised them in an unusually frank way:

"Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia. There now exists a vast repository of images that make it harder to maintain this kind of moral defectiveness. Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: this is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget."[74]

What is going to happen around torture in the United States? I follow the news almost obsessively and the story drags on. As of the time of this writing, President Obama gave a speech at the National Archives—which houses the U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence—to affirm that he will close Guantanamo Prison in spite of legislative balking. It is a progressive move. However, as Michael Ratner, President of the Center for Constitutional Rights, summarized Obama's characteristic way of handling these policy decisions around illegal detention and torture,

"The President wrapped himself in the Constitution and then proceeded to violate it by announcing he would send people before irredeemably flawed military commissions and seek to create a preventive detention scheme that only serves to move Guantanamo to a new location and give it a new name."[75]

Like Michael Ratner and many other activists, I cannot tolerate the ways in which my country abrogates the Rule of Law. I am repelled by the outrages upon the human mind and body that torture, by definition, enacts. But my sense of engagement needs to be tied to something greater than fighting to right my country's wrongs and thus securing my identity as a privileged middle-class U.S. citizen within a more ethical public sphere. At this moment in history, two things have happened with the eruption of the torture narrative as a story about U.S. acts. First, it's an impassible story, just at the Abu Ghraib photos are impassible evidence; we cannot "get on with" or "settle back into" American identity until we deal with what the story entails. And it may not be an identity that should remain unchanged. That is, the torture narrative de-centers the traditional hegemonic view of the United States has of itself as a



model for other nations, a beacon on a hill.

Second, the story to which we need to pay attention is larger than torture. It's about the United States going to war unjustly and fighting indefinitely. It's about the liaisons between catastrophes, international capital, privatization of the U.S. commons, and U.S. military intervention, including the use of torture.[76] We need to conceptualize and work against torture within a global structural framework, beyond just the discourse of human rights. Judith Butler, writing about 9/11, advocates shifting our perspective in this way and its potential benefits:

""[I]f we are to come to understand ourselves as global actors, and acting within a historically established field, and one that has other actions in play, we will need to emerge from the narrative perspective of U.S. unilateralism and, as it were, its defensive structures, to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others. ... The ability to narrate ourselves not from the first person alone, but from, say, the position of the third, or to receive an account delivered in the second, can actually work to expand our understanding of the forms that global power has taken. ....Do we not imagine that the invasion of a sovereign country with a substantial Muslim population, supporting the military regime in Pakistan that actively and violently suppresses free speech, obliterating lives and villages and homes and hospitals, will not foster more adamant and widely disseminated anti-American sentiment and political organizing? Are we not, strategically speaking, interested in ameliorating this violence? Are we not, ethically speaking, obligated to stop its further dissemination, to consider our role in instigating it, and to foment and cultivate another sense of a culturally and religiously diverse global political culture?"[77]



...and beaten. A prisoner will confess to anything to stop the pain.



An U.S. interrogator shows the young men photos, saying they are small figures in the background. It was a rally with bin Laden.



A time and date stamp on the video proves they could not have been there but it still took a long time for their release, which occurred because of intense political activism on their behalf in the UK.

As I consider the dis-ease which the Abu Graib photos engender in viewers, it seems to me that the shredded body may also stand as a metaphor for the physical and social obliteration we potentially face. Both right and left come up with different metaphors and different political solutions to deal with fragile boundaries and borders, including paranoia about impending "attack." Speaking from the Left, my fears come as I witness the world reeling from but not dealing with irrational global capital, nuclear proliferation, ecological degradation, and planet-wide warming. On the right, I see religious fundamentalisms desperately trying to establish enclaves to protect the faithful from the world's moral pollution. Many of my friends react to diffuse political insecurities by wondering what kind of world their children will inherit and by indicating on a personal level they have little sense of either bodily or social integrity: it could all be taken away. Anecdotally, I have found that such a sensibility is widespread. For example, after 9/11 a number of my Indian, Pakistani, and Korean friends indicated to me that as they watched television that day, they said among themselves something like, "Now you know what we feel."

Although my fears, and our need for collective action, will not end when U.S. involvement in torture is resolved, in this historical moment we can and must deal specifically with this issue. As I mentioned at the beginning, all of us must write the "torture story" now, even if only provisionally. Meanings remain highly contested, and only some will be adjudicated in courts. We have at hand a tool both to communicate knowledge and reshape it. That is, the Internet provides an opportunity for many people to evaluate, refine, and generate information and analyses of torture. Most of the Internet sites that amplify the films or provide documentation about torture also have taken the lead in activism around this issue. These include organizations' sites such as the [Center for Constitutional Rights](#), [Physicians for Human Rights](#), [American Civil Liberties Union](#), and [International Justice Network](#). There are many progressive left/liberal sites and blogs such as [scotusblog](#), the [Huffington Post](#), [Salon](#), and [The Nation](#). Also mainstream news sites offer substantial coverage on the issue, such as the [New York Times](#), [New Yorker](#), [Washington Post](#), and [Guardian](#) newspaper (UK). The documentation and analysis of torture now consists of an ever-expanding archive, constantly reinterpreted and feeding into activism in a variety of ways. The torture documentaries I have





Shortly before their release, they were put together in a special room where they could watch TV and eat pizza and McDonalds.

described here provide a way into this archive. To see a ninety-minute film adds to our knowledge but more importantly offers a pathway for understanding the concepts needed to struggle against torture and for the world in which we want to live.

[Go to notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

1a. I wish to express a special debt of appreciation to a number of people. Caroline Picart, Caetlin Benson-Allott, and Paul Hertz conceptually helped in writing this essay. Co-editors Chuck Kleinhans and John Hess and I have been considering these issues together over a long period of time. Scott Curtis generously loaned me some of his books while I was briefly residing in Evanston IL.

[\[return to page 1 of illustrated essay\]](#)

[\[return to page 1 of text version\]](#)

1. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bloomington: Indiana University, 1991, p. 31.

2. Some of my essays are available on my web site:

<<http://www.uoregon.edu/~jlesage/Juliafolder/INDEX4.HTML>>

3. Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, *Standard Operating Procedure*, NY: Penguin, 2008. In the preface, Gourevitch states that he wrote the book on the basis of Morris' interviews, other testimony and documents, and journalistic reports. I use Gourevitch as the author when referring to the book, and Morris as the director when referring to the film.

Errol Morris' blog at *New York Times* <<http://morris.blogs.nytimes.com/>>

Errol Morris' website <<http://www.errolmorris.com/>>

4. <<http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/ghostsofabughraib/resources.html>>

5. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/torture/>>

6. <<http://www.torturingdemocracy.org/>>

7. John Diamond, *USA Today*, 5/20/04. <[http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-05-20-interrogation-rules\\_x.htm?POE=NEWISVA](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-05-20-interrogation-rules_x.htm?POE=NEWISVA)>

"Army Col. Marc Warren, a U.S. military lawyer, told the committee that Woods, who is a military intelligence officer, developed the list of techniques after researching methods 'used by interrogators in other places,' or described in 'any document that we could find' on Army interrogation rules." The list on the wall at Abu Ghraib included these techniques: change of scenery down (moving to a more barren cell); dietary manipulation; environmental

manipulation' sleep adjustment (reverse schedule); isolation for longer than 30 days; presence of military working dogs; sleep management (72 hours maximum); sensory deprivation (72 hours maximum); stress positions (no longer than 45 minutes). "Sanchez says he never saw rules for interrogation."

[[return to page 2 of illustrated essay](#)]

8. Macmillan, 2006.

9. The European Court of Human Rights ruled in 1972 that these techniques did not constitute torture but were cruel and unusual punishment; the UK outlawed them in 1977. Gareth Peirce, lawyer for the Tipton Three—protagonists of *The Road to Guantanamo*—and for Moazzam Begg, condemns UK hypocrisy in now supporting use of the "five techniques" by the United States while hiding its complicity:

"In August 1971 British soldiers arrested 342 men in Northern Ireland claiming that they were IRA suspects. To force their confessions, 12 of them were taken to a secret site and subjected to the now notorious five techniques (forced standing, hooding, sleep deprivation, starvation and thirst, and white noise). Most of the men later reported experiencing auditory hallucinations; the interrogators referred to the room used for noise as the 'music box', and were aware that the detainees were exhibiting distorted thought processes. The Republic of Ireland took the UK to court in Strasbourg for their use of these methods and Britain gave an unconditional promise never to use them again. And yet since November 2001, knowing that these techniques were being adopted (and even enhanced) in our joint operations with the US, our ministers, ministries and intelligence personnel have behaved as if a blind eye could lawfully be turned while at the same time availing themselves of the same sites [for interrogation] and sharing the product of those illegal methods."

Peirce, "Make sure you say that you were treated properly," *London Review of Books*, 14 May 09 <[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n09/print/peiro1\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n09/print/peiro1_.html)>

10. "What Is Torture: Taxonomy of Torture," Philip Carter, *Slate* feature <<http://www.slate.com/features/whatistorture/Taxonomy.html>>

11. Wilkerson and Mora are among many military officers and former military members who have become anti-torture activists. Tony Lagouranis has written a book with Allen Mikaelian, *Fear Up Harsh: An Army Interrogator's Dark Journey through Iraq* (NAL Caliber, 2007).

12. "Brutal Deaths of 2 Afghan Inmates" by Tim Golden, *New York Times*, May 25, 2005 <<http://www.iviews.com/Articles/articles.asp?ref=NT0505-2701>>

13. The log was first published in *Time*, March 3, 2006; available online from Center for Constitutional Rights. The CIA destroyed the interrogation videotapes. The use of torture against al-Qahtani was so extensive that a

Military Commission dropped all prosecution of him in May 2008, but in November 2008, new charges were filed. His was a CIA "laboratory" case in that he was a high value detainee, intending to take part in the Sept. 11 attacks but being turned away at U.S. entry. Reportedly Donald Rumsfeld and others at the Pentagon orchestrated, by phone, each step of what was done to him at Guantanamo.

14. Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* (New York: Doubleday, 2008) and Philippe Sands' *Torture Team: Rumsfeld's Memo and the Betrayal of American Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) both devote extensive sections to discussing al-Qahtani.

15. See excellent overview article, "Failures of Imagination: American Journalists and the Coverage of American Torture" by Eric Umansky, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Sept-Oct 2006. Carlotta Gall's original article can be found at <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9900 EFDD 173FF937A35750CoA9659C8B63&scp=22&sq=bagram&st=nyt>>

16. The CIA's *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation* (July 1963) and its successor, *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual* (1983) were used in military training conducted in Latin American countries, including Honduras, and in various formats were distributed to hundreds of Latin American graduates of the U.S. Army School of Americas at Fort Benning, GA. (KUBARK then was a code word for the CIA.) The manuals explain and advocate the use of electric shock and many of the current interrogation techniques, including blindfolding, nakedness, disruption of sleep, sensory deprivation, and no toilets. These manuals were printed and massively distributed from Fort Huachaca, Arizona, the U.S. headquarters of military intelligence where Caroline Wood is now posted as an interrogations instructor.

17. At the time this essay is being written, Obama has said the U.S. government will reinstitute Military Commissions to try Guantanamo detainees instead of having them tried in U.S. courts. Military Commissions will allow hearsay evidence against the accused, especially from the CIA.

18. Mark Thompson, "Another Gitmo Grows in Afghanistan," *Tim*, Jan. 05, 2009 <<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1869519,00.html>>

19. *Salon Radio*: "ACLU on Obama, Bagram and Secrecy," Glenn Greenwald and Jonathan Haefetz of ACLU National Security Project, Feb. 24, 2009 <<http://www.salon.com/opinion/greenwald/radio/2009/02/24/aclu/index1.html>>

20. "Obama Administration Adopts Bush Policy on Rendition of Detainees to Bagram" press release <<http://www.ijnetwork.org/content/blogcategory/20/48/>>

21. <<http://www.scotusblog.com/wp/us-no-habeas-rights-at-bagram/>>

22. Evan Perez and Jess Bravin, "'Enemy Combatant' Label Is Dropped for Detainees," *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2009



<<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123697422076922961.html>>

23. *Salon Radio*: "ACLU on Obama, Bagram and secrecy,"  
<<http://www.salon.com/opinion/greenwald/radio/2009/02/24/aclu/index1.html>>

23a. The Bagram prisoners' legal representation is through the International Justice Network, that maintains updated news information about this case.  
<<http://www.ijnetwork.org/>>

24. PDF available through the well-documented website for *Torturing Democracy* <<http://www.torturingdemocracy.org/documents/20030314.pdf>>

[[return to page 3 of illustrated essay](#)]

25. Michel Kirk is one of Frontline's main documentary producers. He has made numerous documentaries about the Bush administration, especially tracing the processes of how government officials made decisions which lead to the war in Iraq and how the military carried it out. In conjunction with this documentary, Kirk's research and collection of archival material culminates in his masterful four and a half hour documentary *Bush's War*, which aired in primetime on PBS in March 2008 over two consecutive nights. With the airing of *Bush's War*, the administration was so angered it threatened to cut PBS' funding in half and eliminate it entirely by 2011. For streaming video of *Bush's War* and a very large archive of material, see <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/bushswar/>

The program's website contains an archive that includes over 40 Frontline films and more than 400 interviews with over 400+ interviews with government and military figures, scholars and journalists.

26. *CBS 60 Minutes II*, "Abuse Of Iraqi POWs By GIs Probed: 60 Minutes II Has Exclusive Report On Alleged Mistreatment," April 28, 2004; Seymour Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib: American soldiers brutalized Iraqis. How far up does the responsibility go?" *The New Yorker*. May 10, 2004  
<[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa_fact)>

27. <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc47.2005/links.html>>

28. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/torture/interviews/danner.html>>

[[return to page 2 of text version of essay](#)]

29. Not all documentaries tell a coherent moral tale, especially those that are self-consciously postmodernist. See Trinh T. Minh-ha's work, for example.

30. Lecture by Darius Rejali at the University of Oregon, June 4, 2008.

31. Danner's writings at <<http://www.markdanner.com/writing/>>;

Golden's at <[http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/g/tim\\_golden/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/g/tim_golden/index.html)>

32. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, New York: Henry Holt, 2007. P. 126.

33. Mark Benjamin, "Torture planning began in 2001, Senate report reveals," *Salon*, April 22, 2009 <<http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2009/04/22/benjamin/index.html>>

34. "The CIA's Torture Teachers," NPR, June 25, 2007 <[http://www.democracynow.org/2007/6/25/the\\_cias\\_torture\\_teachers\\_psychologists\\_helped](http://www.democracynow.org/2007/6/25/the_cias_torture_teachers_psychologists_helped)>;

also Mark Benjamin, "The CIA's Torture Teachers," *Salon*, June 21, 2007 <[http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/06/21/cia\\_sere/print.html](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/06/21/cia_sere/print.html)>

35. *Torturing Democracy* also features the words of and interview with former prisoners who describe their abuse, including Moazzam Begg, Bisher Al-Rawi, Mohamedou Slahi, Shafiq Rasul, Binyam Mohamed, Asif Iqbal, Mohamed Mazouz, Ahmed Errachidi and Jumah al-Dossari. Not all of these could be interviewed but actors read excerpts from their statements, often over news video of prisoners in similar situations.

[[return to page 4 of illustrated essay](#)]

36. New York: Penguin, 2008.

37. Tony Lagouranis with Allen Mikaelian, *Fear Up Harsh: An Army Interrogator's Dark Journey Through Iraq*, New York: NAL, 2008; Moazzem Begg with Victoria Brittain, *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantanamo, Bagram, and Kandahar*, London: New Press, 2006.

38. *Camera Lucida*, p. 26, trans. Richard Howard, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981. [[return to page 5 of illustrated essay](#)]

39. *Camera Lucida*, p. 27.

40. "Standard Operating Procedure: Mediating Torture, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 62 no. 4 (Summer 2009): 40.

41. Philip Gourevitch, *Standard Operating Procedure*, p. 72.

42. Tara McKelvey, *Monsterring: Inside America's Policy of Secret Interrogations and Torture in the Terror War* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2007, p. 100) cited in Anne McClintock, "Paranoid Empire: Specters from Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib," *Small Axe*, Number 28 (13:1), March 2009.

Two very important essays about the Abu Ghraib photos repudiate charges that the images are "pornographic," partly because such charges deny the specificity of pornography and also because they downplay the images' recording of torture, humiliation, and abuse on an institutionally sanctioned scale. One such essay is McClintock's. The other is by Judith Butler, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," *Society and Space* 25 (2007). I will take up the issue of the images and sexual representation and potential connections between such depictions of sexual humiliation and viewer response. In this context, I see

nakedness as part of the photos' sexual representation.

43. Mike Crang, "Picturing Practices: Research through the Tourist Gaze," *Progress in Human Geography*, 1997, 21: 359-374.

44. I am indebted for this insight to Mary Ann Tétreault, "The Sexual Politics of Abu Ghraib: Hegemony, Spectacle, and the War on Terror," *NWSA Journal* 18:3 (2006) 34.

45. Butler, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography."

46. "Other Government Agencies," <[http://www.salon.com/news/abu\\_ghraib/2006/03/14/chapter\\_5/index.html](http://www.salon.com/news/abu_ghraib/2006/03/14/chapter_5/index.html)>

47. "A Deadly Interrogation—Can the C.I.A. Legally Kill a Prisoner?" by Jane Mayer, *The New Yorker*, November 14, 2005 <[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/11/14/051114fa\\_fact?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/11/14/051114fa_fact?currentPage=all)>;

"The Most Curious Thing," Errol Morris Blog, "Zoom," *New York Times*, May 19, '08 <<http://morris.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/the-most-curious-thing/>>

"Exposure—*The Woman behind the Camera at Abu Ghraib*" by Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, *The New Yorker*, March 24, 2008, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/24/080324fa\\_fact\\_gourevitch](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/24/080324fa_fact_gourevitch)

48. Errol Morris, Commentary over film, DVD, *Standard Operating Procedure*, Sony Pictures Classics, 2008.

49. Morris and Gourevitch, "Exposure."

50. Mayer, "A Deadly Interrogation."

51. "The Timely Exit," *Globe and Mail*, May 7-15, 2004. <[http://www.raghidadergham.com/print/articles/05\\_07\\_2004\\_argandmail\\_Abu\\_Gharab\\_Prison\\_Atrocities\\_Globe\\_and\\_Mail\\_Doug\\_Saunders.doc](http://www.raghidadergham.com/print/articles/05_07_2004_argandmail_Abu_Gharab_Prison_Atrocities_Globe_and_Mail_Doug_Saunders.doc)>

[[return to page 6 of illustrated essay](#)]

52. Also available on CD, *Standard Operating Procedure*, Varese Sarabande, 2008.

53. I am indebted here to Paul Hertz who watched the film with me and gave me both concepts and vocabulary to put in words what we heard.

54. Butler, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography."

55. I am indebted to Caroline Picart for pointing out to me more nuanced theories of the development of a child into an abuser. Lonnie Athens has formulated a theory of *violentization*, a process he worked out after conducting numerous interviews with violent convicted prisoners. Jeanne Curran and Susan R. Takata summarize his ideas at <<http://www.csudh.edu/dearhabermas/tchessay64.htm>>

55a. Caetlin Benson-Allott gave me this important insight.

55b. "*Hostel II* : Representations of the body in pain and the cinema experience in torture-porn" by Gabrielle Murray, *Jump Cut* 50 (2008)

56. Jane Mayer devotes a whole chapter to Abu Zubayda in her excellent book, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*, New York: Doubleday, 2008. Latest released CIA documents indicate he was waterboarded 83 times; he had reported it to the Red Cross but it seemed hard to believe at the time.

57. Mary Ann Tétreault, "The Sexual Politics of Abu Ghraib: Hegemony, Spectacle, and the Global War on Terror," *NWSA Journal* 18.3 (2006) 33-50

58. Allan Feldman writes that we need to acknowledge the complexities of hearing victims' first person accounts mainly within the context of human rights discourse, which can easily omit from history many of the particularities of individual situations and prematurely impose narrative closure. "Memory Theaters, Virtual Witnessing, and the Trauma-Aesthetic," *Biography* 27:1 (2004) 163-202.

59. The "survivor narrative" that covers a much longer stretch of time has its many layers and contradictions, is much more difficult to receive, and is likely to become flattened out in the telling. Here are some examples of works that consider the complex aftermath:

- *Dr. John Haney Sessions*, dir. Owen Shapiro and Thomas Friedmann, 1983, is an experimental documentary about four adult children of Holocaust survivors.
- *Stalags*, 2007, dir. Ari Libsker, is a documentary about pocket book pornography that flourished in Israel the 1960s and portrayed Nazi women officers sexually torturing concentration camp prisoners.
- "S/M in SA: Sexual Violence, Simulated Sex, and Psychoanalytic Theory" by John K. Noyes (*American Imago* 55:1, 1998, 135-153) analyzes the relation between escalated sexual crime, an increase in S/M prostitution for discipline and bondage, and relations between class-power-gender-race in South Africa.
- The 1996 documentary *Calling The Ghosts: A Story about Rape, War, and Women*, directed by Mandy Jacobson and Karmen Jelincic (New York: Women Make Movies) not only describes not only how Muslim women raped in the concentration camp of Omarska turned their pain into activism but also how their daily lives and feelings were drastically changed.
- Similarly looking at the long aftermath, John Conroy, for *Unspeakable Acts, Ordinary People: The Dynamics of Torture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), interviewed the fourteen Northern Irish men tortured by the British army in 1971 twenty years after that landmark human-rights event; he narrates both the permanent damage done to them as well as the obfuscations of the British government in covering up the torture.

60. Susan Isaacs, "The Nature and Function of Phantasy," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 24 (1948), pp. 73-97.



61. James Allen, Jon Lewis, Leon F. Litwack, and Hilton Als, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, Twin Palm Publishers, 2000; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador: 2004.
62. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* Berkeley: University of CA Press, 1999.
63. See essay by Magnus Ullén in this issue, "Pornography and its critical reception: toward a theory of masturbation."
64. "The Scandal's Growing Shame," *Time*, May 18, 2007.  
<<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,994176,00.html>>
65. Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: 10 Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Berkeley: U CA, 2004, p. 237; revised and expanded from *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9:4, Fall 1984, 283-300.
66. "The Passion of the Christ: Reflections on Mel's Monstrous Messiah Movie and the Culture Wars," *Jump Cut* 47 (2005)  
<<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc47.2005/melsPassion/text.html>>
67. Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly*, 44:4 (Summer 1991) 4.
68. Downloadable as PDF at <<http://www.ccrjustice.org/tipton-three>>
- [[return to page 7 of illustrated essay](#)]
69. Mark Danner, "US Torture: Voices from the Black Sites," *New York Review of Books*, April 9, 2009.  
<<http://www.markdanner.com/articles/show/151>>
70. "News of a Kidnapping," *The Nation*, June 14, 2006  
<<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060703/klawans/single>>
71. David D'Arcy, "Michael Winterbottom's Road Movie," *Green Cine*, July 6, 2006 <<http://www.greencine.com/article?action=view&articleID=306>>
72. Gareth Peirce writes eloquently about this issue of UK complicity in and secrecy about torture. See her essay, "'Make sure you say that you were treated properly': Gareth Peirce Writes about Torture, Secrecy and the British State," *London Review of Books*, May 14, 2009.  
<[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n09/print/peiro1\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n09/print/peiro1_.html)>
73. Allan Feldman summarizes this practice and the scholarship around it. He relates it to contemporary abuse narratives presented for a social goal, in this case, for the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa. "Memory Theaters, Virtual Witnessing, and the Trauma-Aesthetic"
74. "Regarding the Torture of Others," *New York Times*, May 23, 2004  
<<http://donswaim.com/nytimes.sontag.html>>

75. "CCR Guantánamo Attorneys Comment After President's Speech" May 21, 2009 <<http://ccrjustice.org/newsroom/press-releases/ccr-guantánamo-attorneys-comment-after-president's-speech>>

76. As Naomi Klein analyzes in *The Shock Doctrine*.

77. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, New York: Verso, 2004, pp. 8-9.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## A case for torture redux

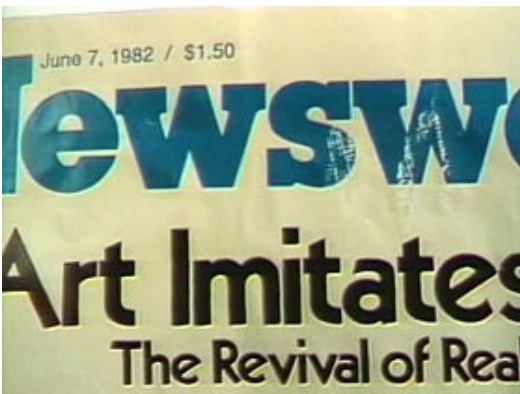
by Martha Rosler

### Introducing *A Simple Case For Torture*

by Chuck Kleinhans



Crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan. The video enters the dramatic space of the hypothetical terrorist nuclear bomb threat.



Pan and scan over cover of *Newsweek* with op-ed essay on torture.

Martha Rosler's essay below reconsiders her 1983 experimental video, *A Simple Case for Torture* in the context of torture as a government authorized interrogation method in the George W. Bush presidency. While some things have changed, the tape remains startlingly prescient and relevant to today's political situation. (A number of Rosler's video works can be found online at Ubuweb: <http://ubu.com/film/rosler.html>). With 24's Jack Bauer weekly pushing the edge of the ends vs. means argument over torture, media images intersect with the need for ideological analysis.

When it first appeared *A Simple Case for Torture* forcefully intervened in key civic issues of the early Reagan era:

- U.S. training of police and military torturers in Latin America, Vietnam, and elsewhere in the developing world;
- state terrorism;
- a deliberate cranking up of the arms race with the Soviets;
- an increasing discussion of the U.S. using nuclear weapons in foreign combats;
- the slashing of federal social programs;
- the growing gap between rich and poor; dramatizing terrorism as a form of fear-mongering;
- U.S. alliances with repressive military regimes while posing as a champion of "democracy."

The hour long video is best described as a visual essay relentlessly arguing its point of view with an exhaustive and exhausting piling on of arguments and counter-arguments, news articles as demonstration and data, and a layered sound track of assertive quotes and narration. Unprepared audiences are startled by the fierce point of attack, which never lets up or modulates in tone, though it does change in topic and emphasis along the way. There are no humanistic interviews with experts and authorities gently offering a personable face and voice. The video continually asks its viewers to concentrate on the ideas presented. It is one of the most insistently didactic videos ever made.

The piece represents one important aspect of Rosler's artistic career in visual arts, performance, installation, video, and critical essay. [A full record to 1998 is in Catherine de Zegher, ed., *Martha Rosler: Positions*



A hand turns the magazine's pages revealing the ordinary contrast of text and attractive consumer advertising images.



Page turns to a "My Turn" guest editorial opinion essay, "The Case for Torture," by professor Michael Levin.



A pan left shows the adjoining page, an ad sponsored by U.S. banking interests addresses fears of losing one's money

in the *Life World*, MIT Press] But it also fits into a larger set of political art-world concerns of its time. The emergence of semiotic and ideological analysis of images in the 60s and 70s brought an analytic frame to what might be seen as "natural" or "taken-for-granted" visual material. Roland Barthes' famous discussion of an image of an African soldier saluting the French colonial flag began a period of scrutiny that reappeared in diverse forms. This path was joined by Situationist confrontations such as Guy Debord's ironic re-appropriations of mass culture for tendentious critique.

Jean-Luc Godard's use of book covers as interpolated intertitles in the films *Two Or Three Things I Know About Her* (1966) and *Le Gai Savoir* (1968) or the insistent analysis of a single photo of Jane Fonda in Vietnam in *Letter to Jane* (Godard and Gorin, 1972) created a new form of political analysis. Godard continued to pursue this in much of his television work of the 1970s, such as *Over and Under Communication: 6 X 2*, with Miéville (1976), which contains a memorable analysis of a French newsweekly magazine in which he tears out all the advertising and ends up with a small pile of editorial pages against a large pile of ads, dramatically pointing out the cash nexus of "news" publishing.

Many forms of analysis contributed to this kind of analysis. From an academic sociological perspective, Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* teased out the connotations of commercial images. At the same time, U.S. artists, across the various arts often responded to political and social issues of the day with similar attention to extracting, underlining, dramatizing, and confronting the dominant ideological materials of the day. Pop Art ironically recirculated commercial world images. Postmodern appropriations ranged from severe critique to mild snark through juxtaposition. This kind of work ranged from Barbara Kruger's poster images with a contrary text calling for thinking through and past habitual thought to AIDS activism confronting the dominant media's bias in covering the early stages of the pandemic. Hans Haacke's installations confronted the ideological nature of art institutions and elite ownership of art. The mainstream of radical media art adapted familiar televisual and social documentary forms, as with Marlon Riggs' *Ethnic Notions* (1986), an analysis of racist images of African Americans in popular culture.

In this context, *A Simple Case for Torture* contributes to the analytic strain of video art with a vengeance. Like a terrier gripping its prey, Rosler savages an editorial column written by a philosophy professor making an "ends vs. means" argument justifying torture under a "ticking bomb" scenario. Literally layering the screen with news articles whose headlines back up her points and contradict her opponent, Rosler overwhelms any attempt at careful processual thinking. The image track is matched with a layered sound track reading news items and theoretical analyses of the dominant discourse. The tape ends with



(at a moment of the Reagan Recession). The terrified sleepless man is assured that putting his money in a bank provides the solution to his worries.



Computer-generated text intertitles echo key words in the essay as the text is read on the voice track. The intertitles serve to emphasize and simultaneously question the essay's rhetoric and thus meaning.



Several minutes into the video, the title appears.

a credit roll bibliography referencing major thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Michael Foucault, and Theodor Adorno. The standard “rule of thumb” for expository lectures of providing one major idea every 10 minutes is abandoned in the first 20 seconds of the analysis’ eruption. For most audiences, especially if unprepared, the effect is startling and alienating. Yet the form also evidences Rosler’s passion to explain.

This relentlessness can be read in different ways. Her earlier video work such as the short, deadpan comic, and didactic *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) juxtaposes gender politics with a cooking-show type of presentation. *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977) records a performance of Rosler being stripped and measured in a technological, clinical reduction of personhood to data. Made for Paper Tiger TV, a series of low production cost analyses of (mostly print) media, *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* (1982) dissects the fashion magazine’s gender politics. And in the 1985 piece *If It’s Too Bad to Be True, It Could Be DISINFORMATION*, Rosler takes on government propaganda which has promoted false news reports to further secret policies; here she uses a form of unremittingly bombarding the viewer. Writing of *Vital Statistics*, Laura Kipnis describes it as “an experiment in radical unpleasure,” stressing its contrast to the dominant forms of “visual pleasure” which naturalize ideology.

While risking audience alienation, Rosler’s work of this period in her career mixes acidic irony with in-your-face aggression and demands to be taken seriously as an intellectual stance. Fifteen years later, it remains the case that women critics can seldom get the kind of media respect accorded to aggressive males. (For a current example, consider how deftly MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow must navigate combining her intelligence, wit, and irony with an endlessly smiling face — “see, I’m no threat!” — and fashionably dykey look and demeanor.) Revisiting *A Simple Case* teaches us about both about torture and the forms of the dominant ideology.

---

## A case for torture redux

by Martha Rosler

I.

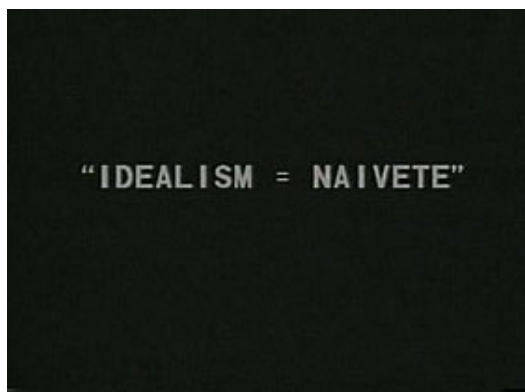
In 1982 I was en route somewhere and picked up a copy of *Newsweek* that — unusually, to my mind — featured a contemporary painting on the cover, a “realist” one by an artist whom I did not know. It struck me as odd that, in that moment of (neo-neo-) Expressionist, mostly Italian and German, painting, the featured work was a modest little portrait of a sitting woman. But lo! the breasts of this young, rather ordinary looking woman slightly slumped in her seat were exposed. The headline was THE NEW REALISM. I opened the magazine and leafed past the ads and the table of contents. The first article caught my eye: a full-page “My Turn” column (the type now called “op ed,” or guest editorial). The title? “The Case for Torture.” I was shocked, and I was meant to be, for this article was a provocation. The belligerent, rhetoric-spouting



A rapid pan pulls back to re-present the paired pages of monetary anxiety and terrorist anxiety. The banking industry offers fiscal security while the neocon philosophy professor argues state-conducted torture will offer civil security.



Close up follows voice reading the essay.



Intertitles dramatize the professor's

president, Ronald Reagan, was ratcheting up the Cold War, smashing what remained of Jimmy Carter's détente by planting nuclear-armed Cruise missiles in Western Europe ... and some obscure nut had made his way onto *Newsweek's* front page arguing for the United States to torture people — to embrace torture as policy. Such advocacy was unheard-of in polite, not to say academic, circles — the author was a philosophy professor, as we shall see. And it certainly contravened anything you might read or hear in the media or in official pronouncements.

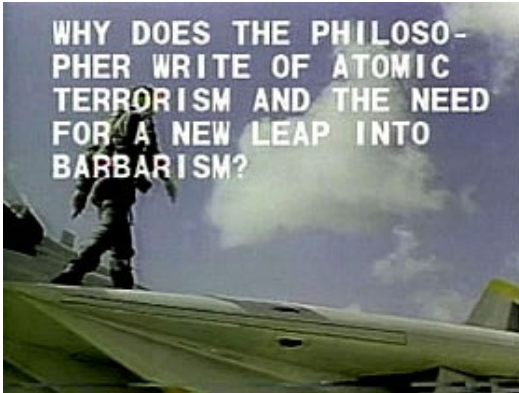
Officially, of course, we as a nation were on the side of justice and human rights, despite the many reports, throughout the previous decade, of the chronic use of torture by the Latin American military and its death squads, supposedly under the tutelage of the United States — a relationship unreported in the mainstream media. Torture and brutalization of military prisoners and suspected enemies had also reputedly been widely practiced during the war in Vietnam, but reports of that had been quickly swept under the rug, along with the most widely publicized war crime, the My Lai massacre[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] which finally saw a reluctant prosecution well after the event. As signatories to the Geneva Convention, the United States insisted on the need for dignified and humane treatment for military prisoners — at least in public, and at least for home consumption. But now, in 1982, something seemed to have changed.

I discovered from the by-line and short bio accompanying the *Newsweek* column that the tendentious screed — for that is what it was — was written by one Michael Levin, an obscure philosophy professor at The City College of New York. His argument mixed together sentimental fears for hypothetical kidnapped infants and the equally hypothetical parental desire to inflict pain on the perpetrators ; fear of Arab plane hijackers (a repetitive scenario in the 1970s); and fear of a nut with an atom bomb in Manhattan, where, of course, City College stands. The answer to the inevitable question Levin poses, "Won't we turn into them ?" was predictable in advance. This smarmy fellow[2] tried to argue that like the (failed) plot to kill Hitler (in 1944), torture, judiciously applied, far from marking a descent into barbarism, was a moral imperative. Could *you* sleep at night if your prissy scruples led to the death of 6 or 8 million innocent New Yorkers?

Here is Charles Krauthammer, prominent "neocon"[3] and, interestingly, a trained psychiatrist, writing at the end of 2005 in the neocon journal *The Weekly Standard*, "The Truth about Torture: It's time to be honest about doing terrible things." He begins by categorizing types of enemies and reaches the heart of his subject:

"Third, there is the terrorist with information. Here the issue of torture gets complicated and the easy pieties don't so easily apply. Let's take the textbook case. Ethics 101: A terrorist has planted a nuclear bomb in New York City. It

ideology and method of argument.



A title overlays images from an Armed Forces recruiting ad showing a fighter pilot inspecting his craft before takeoff.



Another magazine cover represents a feature article on terrorism with a masked figure holding a handgun.

will go off in one hour. A million people will die. You capture the terrorist. He knows where it is. He's not talking.

"Question: If you have the slightest belief that hanging this man by his thumbs will get you the information to save a million people, are you permitted to do it?

"Now, on most issues regarding torture, I confess tentativeness and uncertainty. But on this issue, there can be no uncertainty: Not only is it permissible to hang this miscreant by his thumbs. It is a moral duty."[4]

We have traveled a long way down the torture road since 1982 — not least in the emergence of men like Krauthammer, many following the arguments of Carl Schmitt (a legal and political theorist in Germany, a member of the Nazi Party referred to as "Crown Jurist of the Third Reich") on the necessity for secrecy in government and the adjustment, indeed suspension, of the rule of law in wartime to legitimize exigent situations ("states of exception"). Thus, legal policy in wartime, however defined, is not abandoned but formed around government-identified needs.

Schmitt's ideas were put in fateful combination with those of the German Jewish émigré professor Leo Strauss. Strauss propounded an authoritarian theory of government in which rulers are far superior to the masses of the governed, who need to be kept in the dark on most policy issues. A populist "myth" needs to cover a hidden elite truth. Thus, in philosophy there is an exoteric message and an esoteric one, the true meaning of the text; a Straussian would argue that Machiavelli's sole error was his failure to keep his prescriptions secret. At the University of Chicago, Strauss's students were known as a "cabal," with a reputation for forming "truth squads," harassing those who disagreed with their ideas. A number of Strauss's acolytes went on to seize the reins of the Republican Party and to enter government, where many of these so-called neoconservatives hold sway. Members of this group in and around government, academe, and influential small policy journals have included Paul Wolfowitz, Allan Bloom, William Kristol, Leon Kass, Francis Fukuyama, and Robert Kagan. Many are familiar for their statist enthusiasm for war making and empire.

The velvet glove has come off, and under a ferocious secrecy, the United States has returned to the business of protecting its global hegemony, by sweet talk, posturing, and, if necessary, aggressive actions. A requisite step has been the identification, for public consumption, of a new, quasi-mythical enemy to replace the fallen Evil Empire (as Reagan's speech writer dubbed the Soviet Union back in 1982, as we see in my video ). The designated new demon is the Muslim Other, an enemy that came into clearer focus in the persons of criminal attackers such as those who crashed their planes into New York's World Trade Center in 2001.

There is no doubt that many in the Muslim world are sworn enemies of the United States, or, further, that there are now international networks of militant Muslims, and their supporters, who want to attack the United States and its allies and inflict large numbers of casualties



ments. Opponents of the death penalty, for example, are forever insisting that executing a murderer will not bring back his victim (as if the purpose of capital punishment

*There are situations  
in which  
it is not merely  
permissible but  
morally mandatory.*

were supposed to be resurrection, not deterrence or retribution). But torture, in the cases described, is intended not to bring anyone back but to keep innocents from being dispatched. The most powerful argument against using torture as a punishment or to secure confessions is that such practices disregard the rights of the individual. Well, if the individual is all that important—and he is—it is correspondingly important to protect the rights of individuals threatened by terrorists. If life is so valuable that it must never be taken, the lives of the innocents must be saved even at the price of hurting the one who endangers them.

Krauthammer: "Question: If you have the slightest belief that hanging this man by his thumbs will get you the information to save a million people, are you permitted to do it?"



Media converted to an entertainment model.

among civilians (the hallmark of terrorism). Understanding their motives and tactics is critical to deterring their actions and preventing their success. But, one hardly need stress, the question of who *we* are, of what values we uphold and practices we follow, remains at issue. A popular slogan since the attacks of September 11, 2001, has it that if we do such and such, the terrorists win. But it is impossible not to notice that the eight years of the Bush-Cheney administration have gone far toward instituting something of a police state, and an ever-greater expenditure on military matters.[5]

At the same time, the nation is being stripped of many of its long-held legal and ethical principles — among them, indeed, fundamental elements (such as habeas corpus) of much of our legal system. Can we fail to see this as a victory for those who deplore the Western rule of law, with its Enlightenment values that stress a person's ability to conduct public and private affairs free from the surveillance of moral police and (at least in principle) of the state? If the question is, won't we turn into them, our barbarian opponents, the answer surely depends on defining the characteristics of them. But by the logic (the mythos) underlying this point of view, *they* are the forces of darkness and *we* are the forces of light; therefore, anything *we* do is done for the cause of good, while our opponents can never cross the divide into goodness without sharing our attitudes and goals and accepting our hegemony. We simply cannot become evil barbarians; we cannot become them, though they can become our junior partners, allies, or even silent members of a grateful world.

And who are they? How can we tell? It has turned out to be simple: A ny sign of serious dissent from our leading policies on the part of any group, anywhere, leads to the suggestion that that group (or nation) is not a friend, or worse, that it is an active opponent that could at any moment rise to the level of enemy. We have a list of candidates waiting in the wings: Iran, Syria, North Korea, even Pakistan, and possibly our old familiar enemy, Russia. A ny crime or designated outrage will serve to justify to a believing public the most barbaric and inhuman treatment of our enemies, all for the cause of good. More often than not, outrageous incidents are invented or framed as part of a campaign of disinformation — a term of art for systematic government lying, also termed psyop (psychological operations), against the home audience, a practice pursued with single-minded determination since the Reagan White House (but with special fondness and dedication by the Republicans). It is the systematicity of the message — what George Bush has called “catapulting the propaganda” — that creates others as them, defined out of the category of humanity and repositioned as





Enemies are Others, defined outside the category of humanity.

subhuman, fanatical, indefatigable murderous beasts. This Manichaeian figure of the Enemy has been with us a long time.

To quote former vice-president Al Gore (commenting on what many less politically prominent people have remarked upon — at least since Harold Lasswell's *Propaganda Technique in the World War* [1927] and advertising and public relations pioneer Edward Bernays' *Propaganda* [1928]) —

"The potential for manipulating mass opinions and feelings initially discovered by commercial advertisers is now being even more aggressively exploited by a new generation of media Machiavellis."

Who makes up the "new generation of media Machiavellis"? It is sufficient to name one, of course, Rupert Murdoch, and sufficient, as well, to look at his creation of the television network Fox, under the leadership of a Republican party operative, Roger Ailes. Fox relies on Murdoch's long experience in trolling the bottom of the print media tabloids in England and Australia, exploiting gossip, scandal, and demagoguery. Like most of Murdoch's outlets, Fox's programming is a cover for its demagogic political message, whose Machiavellian slogans are "We Report, You Decide" and, more to the point, "Fair and Balanced." [6] Changes in the U.S. "media landscape" include the great slide in public confidence in media objectivity (prominently featuring the desire to "blame the messenger" for the defeat in Vietnam, a tendency promoted by the right, both in and out of government) and the corollary repeal, under Ronald Reagan, of the Fairness Doctrine. The latter was a rule of telecommunications that had previously kept broadcast media from precisely the partisanship that Fox represents. [7]

A related development has been the conversion of all forms of media to an entertainment model, egged on by media concentration in ever-fewer corporate hands and abetted by their aggressive demands for ever-greater returns to shareholders, including from print media like daily papers even as readership undergoes precipitous decline. We might observe that by the mid 1960s, the Paris-based Situationists had systematically described the central importance of the image world for the conduct of advanced industrial (and post-industrial) Western capitalist society, which they consequently dubbed the Society of the Spectacle.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Newspaper clippings pile up, revealing military involvement in secret “anti-terrorist” activities.



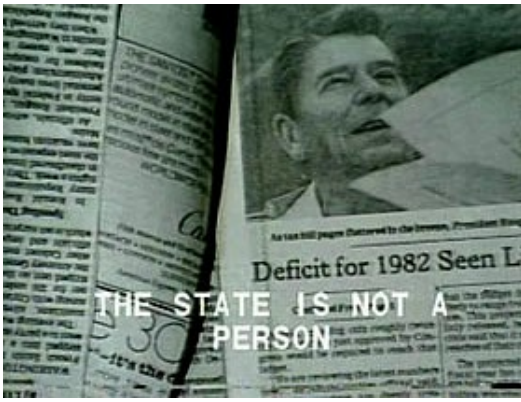
Time magazine cover image represents Reaganomics: cutting social spending, increasing military spending; tax cuts for the rich (and inflating a huge deficit).

## II.

A recurrent Latin American scenario to justify torture has been the proposition, “Suppose a little girl has been kidnapped” in the urban jungle? What police officer would not in good conscience torture half the city to find her and bring her home to her desperate parents? At present our script is different. We torture — or we don’t torture, the story goes, we subject our non-uniformed, stateless enemy combatants to moderate stress and pressure short of outright organ failure.[8][[open endnotes in new window](#)] And we do this to protect the Homeland and the republic from “bad news” that (in the words of Administration figures from George Bush to Condoleezza Rice to Colin Powell) “could take the form of a mushroom cloud.” Or we send our captured “evildoers” to other countries where they know what to do with them, our president has let us know, with a wink and a chuckle.[9] In the 1980s, as we waged our dirty little — generally proxy — wars in Central and South America,[10] the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) manual for interrogation was leaked, causing great embarrassment and public disavowal by the military and the CIA and apparently its eventual removal from use.[11] The impetus of our tactics for wringing information out of people using psychological techniques supposedly resulted from the observation of the apparent ease with which U.S. troops during the Korean War gave up information or joined the other side (this saw the birth of the term “brainwashing”) as well as the earlier observation of the public confession of the Hungarian Cardinal Mindszenty during his 1949 show trial for crimes against the communist state.

Techniques designed to break down personality were the subject of secret experiments for the next decades, with important research done by one of Canada’s most prominent psychiatrists working with U.S. forces. The more recent protocols for interrogation, the ones in use now — known as SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) — grew out of these investigations and were developed by psychologists training U.S. forces to withstand interrogation by an enemy. The planned-for methods attributed to the barbarians, or so the story goes, underwent a turnabout and were adopted as our own methods. These include, in addition to cruder methods, sleep deprivation, extreme isolation, and sensory deprivation, and the application of other means of softening people up psychologically, creating systems of rewards and manipulating their terrors, with the aim of making them emotionally dependent. (As a Latin American torturer supposedly remarked to one of his victims long ago, “We make reality in here.”)

It should be no surprise that — presumably like all governments — our government abuses people when it decides it is in the national interest, no matter how narrowly that interest defined. What is different about



Questioning one of the philosopher's central assumptions, that the state can be discussed as if it were an individual human. The video begins to question the rhetoric of sliding from "we" citizens to the state to the state as personified in the President.



Headlines reveal the effects of Reaganomics: worsening conditions for the poor.



the present moment is the country's apparent willingness to publicly embrace cruelty, albeit by another name, and to insist on the need for astonishingly widespread, open-ended surveillance of the home population (a signal characteristic of a police state). These actions are carried out by the CIA and the military alike, although the CIA has never before, it seems, had such widespread involvement in detention and interrogation, as opposed to intelligence collection (spying), on the one hand, and covert operations (killing), on the other.

The longer these stark changes in accepted practice go on without causing the government to fall (in whatever way that might happen in our system), the more emboldened the government becomes, and the more such practices and their rhetorical accompaniments are normalized. The "harsh" tactics now in regular use, if not always publicly acknowledged, include not only beating, sleep deprivation, waterboarding and forcible injection of fluids into bodily orifices as well as other violations of bodily integrity, simulated preparation for execution, prolonged exposure to cold or heat, stress positions, confinement in tiny, dark (or conversely, permanently lit), very loud, unceasing music or muffled spaces but also, by and large, virtually all the things Nazis were vilified for doing<sup>[12]</sup> — and perhaps more sophisticated torments.

Here is Charles Krauthammer, in his column cited above:

"We have recently learned that since 9/11 the United States has maintained a series of 'black sites' around the world, secret detention centers where presumably high-level terrorists like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed have been imprisoned. The world is scandalized ... [but] I feel reassured. It would be a gross dereliction of duty for any government not to keep Khalid Sheikh Mohammed isolated, disoriented, alone, despairing, cold and sleepless, in some godforsaken hidden location in order to find out what he knew about plans for future mass murder. What are we supposed to do? Give him a nice cell in a warm Manhattan prison, complete with Miranda rights, a mellifluous lawyer, and his own website?... Let's assume (and hope) that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed has been kept in one of these black sites, say, a cell somewhere in Romania, held entirely incommunicado and subjected to [this] kind of 'coercive interrogation.'"

In the *New Yorker* issue out on the stands as I write, Jane Mayer describes the treatment of KSM (as Mohammed is called by his captors), supplying some of the details Krauthammer glosses over, and which the International Committee of the Red Cross has, in a confidential report, suggested is illegal according to international law. But Krauthammer,



Videomaker Rosler continues the simple desktop style of presentation. She uses toys of military vehicles and toy soldiers to represent U.S. military activities.



Headlines reveal the Cold War connections between escalating military activity, foreign policy, and capitalist economics.



At her desk, Rosler looks at her face in a hand mirror. Key books for the analysis are on the desk — such as Amnesty International's annual human rights reports and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.

and no doubt millions of his fellow Americans, is reassured.[13]

Just as President Bush today denounces the Taliban as brutal, cold-blooded killers but fails to consider what it means systematically to employ air force bombers, ordnance-dropping drones operated from an air base in the Western United States, or the newly announced bomb-carrying battlefield robots on a largely civilian population in Afghanistan and Iraq (not to mention landmines, cluster bombs, white phosphorus, or depleted uranium), the rationale surely is, "If we do it, it is all right." If *we* violate international treaties and our own bodies of law in torturing people, surely it is all right. Can we doubt that the majority of German citizens under the Nazis thought that as well?

### III.

Back in 1982, I was pretty shaken by the pro-torture article and saw many ironies in the way it was embedded in that issue of *Newsweek*, one of the country's top two weekly news magazines. There it was, among the aforementioned article about a New Realism in painting, as well as a hateful set of letters about the adoption of a new posture of "victimhood," identified by the eagle-eyed right, in those long-suffering groups who had finally protested getting the short end of the stick when it came to voting rights, wages, and social and economic opportunities of all kinds: women, blacks, Latinos, gays, native people — all those "whiners" and "weepers" unsatisfied with their lot, along with criminals who did not want to be put to death, and the potentiators of all of that crap that made America weak and ungovernable... and economically less productive (because less disciplined by fears of unemployment) than Americans ought to be (and would be, darn soon).

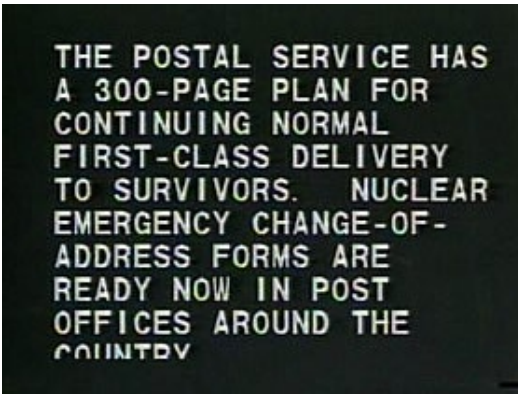
The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 had brought about a different sort of New Realism, in which hard-hearted, "Go ahead, make my day" attitudes,[14] expressed with a theatrically practiced nasty swagger and a steely glint in the eye, would replace empathy and "love" (a signature sixties' idea). Jingoistic patriotism and militarism would replace Carter's international focus on "human rights." Never mind the conscious appeal to racism and Christian suprematism that underlay the new mood, calculated to bring America out of the Jimmy Carter post-Vietnam malaise into a "U.S.A! U.S.A!" moment. Conflating civil religion — always a favorite of the American right — with fundamentalist Christianity, Reagan told a gathering of evangelical ministers that the fact that the United States was set between the two oceans meant God had intended us to rule the Continent (compare Mr. Bush, Jr.'s, apparent discovery, 25 years later, that planes could cross the oceans and harm us).

In tune with this new aggressive national mood of triumphalism and assertive messianism, advertising began to feature outsize desires for luxury goods, powerful cars, big houses, financial services (this was the "Greed is good" era), and, not coincidentally, images of sexy (and often covertly submissive) women and dominant white men, some of them appearing in this very issue of *Newsweek*.[15] Ruling the continent meant, it seems, what had already been enunciated, early in the 19th century, as the Monroe Doctrine: the control of North and South — and, of course, Central — America and, for that matter, the Caribbean. This is





Headlines about Reagan's self-stated willingness to use nuclear weapons in both strategic and conventional wars underline the video's case: it is actually the U.S. that uses nuclear weapons as a coercive threat and this is a form of state terrorism.



Video character-generated scrolls underline U.S. preparation for nuclear war.



Sitting in a car in Brooklyn, Rosler

what is colloquially referred to as “our backyard.”

#### IV.

My response to *Newsweek's* feature was to make a videotape that would tie the pro-torture article to global and national trends — geopolitical “facts on the ground” and the presumed neo-imperialism exercised through information technologies, from data management to cultural products such as movies and music to advertising. I saw the pro-torture article as embedded in a stream of ads, letters, articles, and pictures designed to naturalize the U.S. worldview and simultaneously to instill fear in Americans through warnings about banking crises and a generalized xenophobia, a fear of the rest of the world. This was a bombardment of terrors and distractions that would decenter the citizens of the Society of the Spectacle and warn them to step back from the edge of political engagement into the cocoon of private preoccupations. I had no desire to make a discursive documentary that would deconstruct the torture essay point by point, poking holes in its sophistic arguments. Nor did I want to make a work as slick as advertising in its visuals or visually arresting through the use of torture photos, which I believed would replicate the pacification of viewers that is a hallmark of spectacle culture.

Instead, “torture” would be invoked through the steady bombardment of the viewer by ordinary forms of corporate information transmission, mixed in with more reliable sources. The scene was set for the work in the video studio, in my waterfront loft, and in the city; with the use of books and toys; but most of all amidst the barrage of print, radio, and television that was coming to mediate (some might say dominate) our daily lives and experience, both private and public. The tape was meant as a meditation of sorts on the worldview implied by Levin's article, taking up a few of its risibly offensive arguments but trying to look past it through the information blitz.

The work opens with a car ride across the Manhattan Bridge into Lower Manhattan backed by a music score (recorded by a band I had met in Banff, Alberta, where I began working on the video) and a reading of most of Levin's article. Throughout, the relationship between economic and political insecurity is stressed, just as Levin's article is shown to be placed next to an ad showing a sleepless man worrying about his money that nonetheless offers the reassurance that America's banks are secure.

The first ten minutes on the work center on the article, employing what was then an innovation: large words isolated on or moving across the screen and very tight pans across print images and headlines. [16] The separation of visual and audio tracks begins. With ordinary people reading a voiceover script interrogating Professor Levin's article, the work moves into a blizzard of articles that slide past the screen, their headlines teasing the eye, a visual ballet on which was overlaid an intermittent crawling text and, on the soundtrack, radio clips accompanying the script. The visual and sound clips address terrorism; the Red Army Faction (the “Baader-Meinhof” group) and the draconian

looks across the river at Manhattan, the imagined target of the philosopher's "ticking nuclear bomb" fantasy. The 1983 image, with the World Trade Center as part of the cityscape, acquires another layer of irony post 9/11. In contradistinction to the philosopher's fantasies, that attack was not part of a blackmail scheme and was decidedly low-tech and without warning. It could not have been forewarned or stopped by any amount of torture.



In contrast to the philosopher's hypothetical victims, the actual victims of terrorism such as the "disappeared" in Argentina, the raped, tortured, and executed in Central America, and Palestine civilians in Lebanon are evoked.



The fantasy of persecution is

German responses; the torture of women; U.S. and worldwide economic trends; and advertising. One section asks if the torturer will be a civil servant, and at what pay grade, and whether an injured torturer would receive workmen's compensation; in reality, of course, torturers, like executioners, are shielded from public view.[17] The central focus of the video is on state terrorism and torture primarily in Central and South America, often with U.S. complicity, as well as on the newly prominent nuclear brinksmanship, not to mention the way in which the media convey government messages and disinformation.

The voiceover comments:

"Atomic terrorists hold the entire population hostage? The real source of atomic terrorism is not terrorists. It is the State. ... The philosopher [Levin] ascribes to the nightmare terrorists the threat the United States has repeated visited on the world....

Why does the philosopher choose this moment to write of atomic terrorism? Why does *Newsweek* publish it?"

The video, using text and various found footage and images, explores the commands reportedly given to the Latin American torturers to feel no pity toward their victims; in a "torture class,"

"troops were told that watching will make you feel more like a man. The officer added that they should not feel pity for anyone but only hate for those who are enemies of our country."

(In the current battles there has been repeated testimony by U.S. soldiers that abuse and torture of prisoners, as suggested by some of their trophy photos from Abu Ghraib, were treated as an occasion for partying and group hilarity.)

A further section of the work details the particular abuses heaped upon women, children, and babies, both those detained and tortured and those left behind when men are abducted and killed. It then spends some time exploring Hannah Arendt's concepts of totalitarianism and relating them to developments in Latin America:

"In the last and fully totalitarian stage ... the concepts of the objective enemy and the logically possible crime are abandoned, the victims chosen completely at random.... The innocent and the guilty are equally undesirable. The change in the concept of crime and criminal determines the new and terrible methods of the totalitarian secret police ,,, undesirables disappear from the face of the earth; the only trace they leave behind is the memory of those who knew and loved them, and one of the most difficult tasks of the secret police is to make sure that even such traces will disappear...."

The voiceover continues:

"Disappearance was used by the Nazis in the occupied territories in the Forties under the Nacht und Nebel (Night

contagious. To imagine disaster is in some way to desire it.



Rosler crowns Professor Levin a "philosopher king."

and Fog) Decree to dispose of people 'endangering German security' by means of what Field Marshal Keitel described as 'effective intimidation.'

"At the First Latin American Congress of Relatives of the Disappeared, held in Costa Rica in January 1981, the estimate given for disappeared men, women, and children over the past two decades was 90 thousand. By contrast, the CIA's recent estimate of the total number of deaths resulting from 'international terrorist' violence for the period 1968 to 1980 is 3,668, or about 4 percent of the disappeared in Latin America alone. Although the Congress on the Disappeared presented testimony from 12 Latin countries, it wasn't mentioned in the U.S. press. If there were a similar congress on East Bloc disappeared, with mothers reporting on their disappeared children, would the media overlook it?

"On June 21, 1980, 30 Guatemalan labor leaders were seized by para-military forces, packed into trucks, and disappeared; no mention in the U.S. media. Suppose that Lech Walesa and 29 others Polish labor leaders had been seized by the Polish authorities and disappeared like the 30 Guatemalans — imagine the U.S. response."

In an interlude, a tenor sings an a cappella song whose lyrics center on economic woes, jungle imagery, the new investment value of art, and the taste for authoritarian leadership and patriarchalist neo-neo-expressionist painting in times of uncertainty. It begins,

"When the economy shrinks, the whole world shrinks.  
Darkness and chaos press in all around ..."

In a later verse:

"Look out for your money, your kids and your wife  
If you don't want to worry the rest of your life.  
Money money money money money.  
Green is gold, gold is green  
No rate of profit is really obscene  
As long as I can get it.  
Gold is the color of all the best things  
Gold is the color of oil and big paintings."

From the video's voiceover:

"Just as the philosopher [Levin — or, say, Krauthammer, or U.S. government officials] imagines that the State has individual rights, he imagines that bad people give up their individual rights — his terrorists *cease to be* individual humans. ... Some of the most 'civilized' political candidates supported the death penalty not as a deterrent but as 'simple justice' — that is, retribution. Iran's retribution is barbarism, ours is justice.

'Distrust all in whom the impulse to punish is powerful' — Nietzsche"



On the screen this text appears:

"People who demand 'law and order' are the first to want to get rid of it at their convenience and whim. In the halls of state and in the press, the ayatollahs were castigated for 'medieval barbarism' by the same people demanding retribution against criminals as U.S. state policy — which put them in absolute accord with those in the street shouting fuck iran and nuke the ayatollah.

As usual, we project onto those we call our enemies the criminal acts we want to commit.

V.

The final section of the video uses philosopher Michel Foucault's portentous discussion, in *Discipline and Punish*, of the role of torture and hanging in the public square and their changing effect through time on the sentiment of the crowd, whose growing restiveness finally led executions to be moved out of public view. (Reform movements presumably led to the eschewal of torture in favor of confinement and "correction.")

"In these executions, which ought to show only the terrorizing power of the prince, there was a whole aspect of the carnival, in which rules were inverted, authority mocked and criminals transformed into heroes. ... But above all — and this was why these disadvantages became a political danger — the people never felt closer to those who paid the penalty than in those rituals intended to show the horror of the crime and the invincibility of power; never did the people feel more threatened, like them, by a legal violence exercised without moderation or restraint. ... [O]ut of the ceremony of the public execution, ... it was this solidarity much more than the sovereign power that was likely to emerge with redoubled strength. The reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not to forget that the executions did not, in fact, frighten the people. One of their first cries was to demand their abolition."

A hand reaches into the frame and places a tiny gold crown on the photo of the torture column's author, as the characteristics of the strongman political leader appear on the screen.

**hawk  
lean  
sinewy  
manly  
man on a white horse  
possessed of secret knowledge  
masterful  
dominator  
self assured  
tough  
tough minded**



## in the know

The final words, a quote from Adorno (from his book *Minima Moralia*) are apparently spoken — thanks to the miracle of video editing — by an ABC reporter standing on a street corner somewhere. They are, in part:

"Psychology knows that he who imagines disasters in some way desires them.... The fantasy of persecution is contagious. ... The fulfillment of persecution fantasies springs from their affinity to bloody realities.... Even the worst, most senseless representations of events, the wildest projections, contain the unconscious effort of consciousness to recognize the fatal flaw by which society perpetuates its existence."

The work closes with a series of propositions, both chanted and floating on the screen, suggest what might make authoritarianism attractive, even to a democratic electorate.

**order is more important than law.  
law is more important than justice.  
security is more important than freedom.  
money is more important than mercy.  
my pleasure necessitates your pain.  
and death is more important than change.**

## VI.

*A Simple Case for Torture* is a work begun in 1982 about the saber-rattling militarism and “small wars” that were held to be the picture of war fighting for the foreseeable future (despite the constant invocation of the nuclear threat). Some of this picture has stayed the same, but, as I have argued, among the worst contemporary developments is the all-but-public official embrace of torture as a regular method of obtaining information from detainees and terrorizing everyone else, along with the concomitant suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, the arrogation to the president of monarchic privilege, and the advancing of a surveillance society. That society is also increasingly divided into the very rich and the poor, in a process that long ago was called, by Noam Chomsky and others, the Latin Americanization of the United States. That process has always included the use of physical abuse, torture, disappearance, and extra-judicial killing as part of the arsenal of coercion on behalf of economic and political elites. The task falls, as it always has to the citizens, to press back against these abuses and to work to create a human community marked by justice and universal rights.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

"A Case for Torture Redux" is © Martha Rosler, 2007

1. On March 16, 1968, a Company of the U.S. Army murdered between 350 and 504 defenseless civilians, primarily women, old men, and babies, in the village of My Lai in the hamlet of Son My in South Vietnam. Many of the victims, especially women, were abused before the massacre, and some survivors afterward. Initial reports to officers and civilian authorities were ignored despite photographic evidence and testimony. It was the photographic evidence of dead children that finally prevented a cover up. Although 26 soldiers and officers were charged, only one, Lieutenant William Calley, was convicted of any crime. Calley was convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment, but through a series of interventions and reviews, including one by President Nixon, Calley served only about 3 years, mostly under house arrest. Calley wrote, in self-justification:

"We weren't in Mylai to kill human beings, really. We were there to kill *ideology* that is carried by—I don't know. Pawns. Blobs. Pieces of flesh, and I wasn't in Mylai to destroy intelligent men. I was there to destroy an intangible idea. To destroy communism.... I looked at communism as a Southerner looks at a Negro, supposedly. *It's evil. It's bad.*" (pp. 104-105)

Also: "And babies. On babies everyone's really hung up. 'But babies! The little innocent babies!' of course, we've been in Vietnam for ten years now. If we're in Vietnam another ten, if your son is killed by those babies you'll cry at me, 'Why didn't you kill those babies that day?'.... We stopped the peoples [*sic*] and one of the GIs asked, 'What are we to do with them?' I said, 'Well, everything *is* to be killed—.'" (pp. 102-103)

A scant few years later, Argentine dictator Jorge Videla Redondo, leader of a junta that presided over the extrajudicial torture and murder of about 30 thousand of its citizens, is reported to have opined,

"A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilizations." [[return to page one](#)]

2. Levin was later embroiled in a racist controversy with an African American professor at his college and, more recently, he has been noted as a regular attendee of conferences run by a white supremacist group, American

Renaissance.

3. The term “neoconservative,” shortened to “neocon,” designates a hawkish right-wing scourge, often a former Cold War liberal or even a Trotskyist, in favor of aggressive foreign expansionism and a national security state under a “unitary executive” rather than the Constitutionally mandated tripartite government. The term is meant to differentiate those so designated from “paleocons” (paleo- is the Greek prefix denoting old), more traditional conservatives who are generally anti-statist and often against foreign military involvement. These groups are at loggerheads over the disastrously intrusive, and monstrosly expensive, policies of the Bush-Cheney administration.

4. *The Weekly Standard*, December 5, 2005 (Vol. 11, issue 12). Krauthammer chooses to illustrate his argument with a cartoon version of torture while presumably knowing quite well that much more systematic and sophisticated methods are in use. See below.

5.. Military historian Andrew J. Bacevich, in a review article in the *Nation* (“The Semiwarriors,” April 23, 2007), describes the increasing militarization of U.S. foreign policy under successive postwar administrations. Bacevich refers to the reigning theory as “semiwar,” using a term coined by James Forrestal, the first Secretary of Defense when that department was created after the end of the Second World War. Bacevich traces the decline in the power of ordinary citizens and the Congress to this (covert) doctrine of governance, in which the president is more and more conceived of as “the commander in chief” rather than as a civilian head of state in charge of one branch of government among a triad of coequals. Under this doctrine, the government operates by a rule of secrecy that fits well with the Straussian and neoconservative ideology outlined above. See also Hannah Arendt’s review of the Pentagon Papers, astonishingly contemporary in its observations (“Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers,” *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 17, No. 8, Nov. 18, 1971).

6. An essay could be devoted to that particular slogan, but let me simply observe that surveys have revealed that the more people watch Fox, the less they know about public events; the signal delusion here is that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the events of September 11.

7. The decision that long-settled telecommunications law and regulations did not apply to cablecasts, as they did to broadcast media, was part of this great change.

8. A standard provided to President Bush by his obliging lawyers Alberto Gonzales (a former real estate lawyer and George Bush’s obliging ancilla in the Texas statehouse) and John Yoo (a young right-wing lawyer whose opinions defended unlimited Presidential power in wartime and declared sections of the Geneva Conventions of the treatment of prisoners to be obsolete), with the help of David Addington, a senior aide to Vice President Dick Cheney. Think of Carl Schmitt in this context.

9. Despite this, on January 27th, 2005, President Bush told the *New York Times* that “torture is never acceptable, nor do we hand over people to

countries that do torture”—see [Jane Mayer](#), “Outsourcing Torture: The Secret History of America’s ‘Extraordinary Rendition’ Program,” *New Yorker*, Feb. 14, 2005. Several cases that subsequently have come to light have provided the president a liar, including that of the Syrian-born Canadian engineer Maher Arar, cited by Mayer as having been kidnapped, thanks to faulty intelligence from Canadians, while in transit in 2002 through a U.S. airport and sent to Syria for months of torture. (Arar, released over a year later, subsequently received a public apology, not from the U.S., but from the Canadian government, which also provided him with a financial settlement.)

Although most references to “rendition,” or abduction and relegation of people whom U.S. agents have kidnapped, describe them as having been sent to Syria, Yemen, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, and other draconian regimes whom we otherwise denounce for their lack of “human rights,” the U.S. has also sent such prisoners to its own newly constructed, highly technologized secret prisons in countries like Poland and Romania, in the Russian “near abroad,” the counterpart of our Latin American and Caribbean “back yard.” It has been alleged that Germany has also secretly held such prisoners for the U.S.. Rendition is the prelude to mistreatment and torture.

On the matter of kidnapping and transport, or rendition, here is Jane Mayer, “Outsourcing Torture,” cited above:

“In 1998, Congress passed legislation declaring that it is ‘the policy of the United States not to expel, extradite, or otherwise effect the involuntary return of any person to a country in which there are substantial grounds for believing the person would be in danger of being subjected to torture, regardless of whether the person is physically present in the United States.’”

As Mayer notes, however, the Bush government claimed that “new rules of engagement” required a “New Paradigm” (as named by then-White House counsel Alberto Gonzales) to deal with “stateless terrorists” and quickly extract information from captives. Days after the events of September 11, 2001, Vice-President Dick Cheney made his notorious “dark side” remark on a television talk show, earning him the epithet Darth Vader (the evil opponent in the Star Wars movies) among the liberal blogs: we will

“work through, sort of, the dark side. ...A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we’re going to be successful. That’s the world these folks operate in. And so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective” (*ibid*).

10. Our proxy fighters included not only those called the Contras (counterrevolutionaries), in Nicaragua but also, according to journalists on the scene, Israeli and South Korean combat units in several Central American countries.

11. A [secret Department of Defense report](#) —*Improper Material in Spanish-Language Intelligence Manuals* (10 March 1992)—written for then Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney. warned that ‘U.S. Army intelligence manuals that



incorporated the earlier work of the CIA for training Latin American military officers in interrogation and counterintelligence techniques contained 'offensive and objectionable material' that 'undermines U.S. credibility, and could result in significant embarrassment.'" From The National Security Archive document "Prisoner Abuse: Patterns from the Past," <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/index.htm#dod1992>.

According the Archive, the Carter administration had halted the counterintelligence training programs at the U.S. School of the Americas, then in Panama, but the program, including the use of the same manuals, was reinstated by President Reagan in 1982 and was in use for the next nine years, until Cheney accepted the recommendations contained in *Improper Material*. A further CIA manual dated July 1963, *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation* (KUBARK is simply the CIA itself), is a guide for obtaining information from so-called resistant sources; it outlines techniques that have become all too familiar from the revelations about the present campaigns.

It has reliably been alleged that French torturers, veterans of the unspeakable Algerian War of the early 1960s, trained South Americans in their techniques, including an emphasis on the physical humiliation, that has now become a feature of U.S. methods in the Arab world.

12. Vilified in the Allied press, by legal authorities in the postwar Nuremberg trials, and in a floodtide of popular postwar movies.

13. Jane Mayer, "The Black Sites: A Rare Look Inside the C.I.A.'s Secret Interrogation Program," *New Yorker*, August 13, 2007, pp. 46-57.

14. The phrase, which is an invitation to malefactors to provide an excuse to be shot and killed, was featured in *Sudden Impact* (1983), a popular movie in the Dirty Harry vengeance-driven police cycle featuring the right wing actor Clint Eastwood. Reagan picked up the phrase soon afterward.

15. Earlier, in the 1970s, the more overtly sex-oriented and whites-only advertisements had largely disappeared, in tune with the public sentiments reinforcing the social movements of the day.

16. Very soon after, with the improvement of character generation and of broadcast-quality macro lenses, these effects would become a regular feature of advertisements, a development that undercuts how present-day audiences see this portion of this work.

17. And increasingly they are contract laborers, such as the interrogators furnished by the determinedly secretive, 1.6 billion-dollar firm CACI, implicated by name in some of the abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Mercenaries from various countries and other contractors make up about half of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, and perhaps elsewhere.

"It's insanity," said Robert Baer, a former CIA agent... concerned about the private contractors' free-ranging role. 'These are rank amateurs and there is no legally binding law on these guys as far as

I could tell. ...' The Pentagon had no comment on the role of contractors at Abu Ghraib...."

— Julian Borger, "U.S. military in torture scandal: Use of private contractors in Iraqi jail interrogations highlighted by inquiry into abuse of prisoners," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2004.

The report on the Abu Ghraib abuses by U.S. General Antonio Taguba claims that Steven Stephanowicz had encouraged MPs [Military Police] under his command to terrorize inmates, and "clearly knew his instructions equated to physical abuse."

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### *The Wire* and the world: narrative and metanarrative

by [Helena Sheehan](#) and [Sheamus Sweeney](#)



*The Wire* ensemble: cops, junkies, dealers, lawyers, judges, dockers, prostitutes, prisoners, teachers, students, politicians, journalists



*The Wire*: David Simon on location in Baltimore.

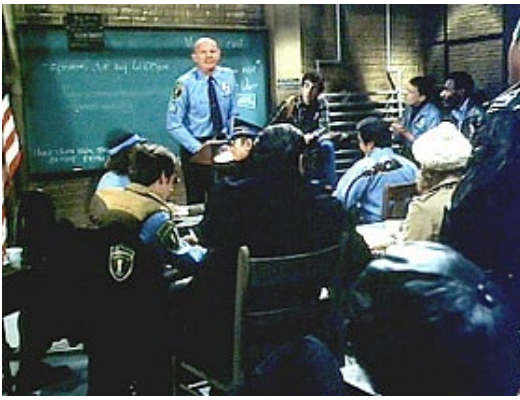
Considered by many critics to be the best television drama series ever, *The Wire* ran from 2002 to 2008.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] It was made and set in Baltimore, employing a large ensemble cast playing cops, junkies, dealers, lawyers, judges, dockers, prostitutes, prisoners, teachers, students, politicians, journalists.[2] The dramatis personae range widely, not only horizontally but vertically, from the foot soldiers of the drug trade, police department, school system and newspapers through middle management to the higher executives, showing parallel problems and choices pervading the whole society. Starting with city cops pursuing a major drugs operation, the drama moves outward, inward, upward, and downward to the docks, city hall, media outlets and schools. There are murders, affairs, bribes, trials, exams, elections, promotions, statistics, bylines, prizes, careers rising and falling, and much more.

Summing up the surface plot does not tell the real story. There is an HBO podcast called "4 seasons in 4 minutes." [3] For those who have not seen *The Wire*, it looks like one more hyped-up TV drama and makes the critical acclaim surrounding the series seem incomprehensible. For those who have seen it, it is ironically funny and heightens the sense of how much more there is to it than can possibly be conveyed by simply recounting its plotlines. David Simon, its co-creator, admits,

"The raw material of our plotting seems to be the same stuff of so many other police procedurals." [4]

### "We're not as smart as *The Wire*."

Although it bears many similarities to other police procedurals, this series also marks a new departure. As the genre has evolved over the decades, dissonance, disruption and ambiguity of resolution have increased. The gap between law and justice has widened in TV drama as it has widened in social consciousness. Cops such as Andy Sipowicz [*NYPD Blue*], Frank Pembleton [*Homicide: Life on the Street*], Vic Mackey [*The Shield*] and Olivia Benson [*Law & Order: SVU*] are a different species from Joe Friday [*Dragnet*]. They are no longer untainted and uncomplicated agents of righteousness, but morally conflicted, psychologically complex men and women struggling with difficult personal lives as well as a crumbling social contract. They cross many a line, both ethically and legally. *The Wire* bears many



Continuities: *Hill Street Blues* roll call: "Let's be careful out there."



Parallel scene: roll call on *The Wire*.



Continuities: case board from *Homicide: Life on the Street* ...

characteristics of the best of its predecessors. Indeed some of its set-ups recall strikingly what went before. For example, the roll call scenes in the western district station, particularly in the final season, seem to pay homage to those starting every episode of *Hill Street Blues*.

Nevertheless *The Wire* represents a leap in the evolution of the genre. It has moved complexity up a level, and in the process it has opened narrative up in terms of social context, showing a social order in steep decline in which cops, judges, teachers, politicians, journalists as well as criminals are overwhelmed by corrupting forces that often prevail over all other impulses.

It has also broken from the standard narrative structure to which most cop shows still adhere. In these, a relatively harmonious status quo is disturbed by a murder, rape or assault, followed by an investigation combining elements of pavement pounding, interrogation and forensic detection. The script brings the killer, rapist or assailant to justice by the final scene and restores harmony. *The Wire's* narrative structure unfolds according to a much longer and less predictable story arc. It also reveals a more astute social analysis. It particularly unfolds a more intricate view of the underclass. As Simon observes:

"On shows where the arrest matters ... the suspect exists to exalt the good guys, to make the Sipowiczs and the Pembletons and the Joe Fridays that much more moral, that much more righteous, that much more intellectualized. It's to validate their point of view and the point of view of society. So, you end up with same stilted picture of the underclass. Either they're the salt of earth looking for a break and not at all responsible, or they're venal and evil and need to be punished." [5]

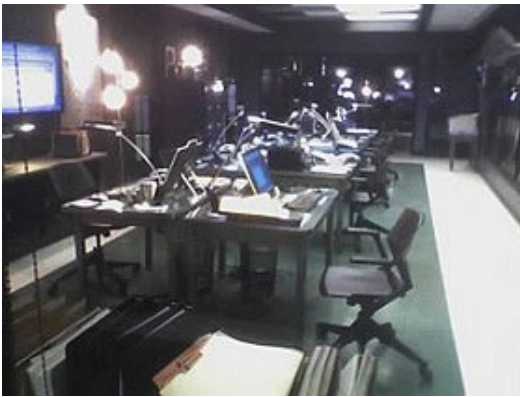
Simon includes in the pantheon of standard cop shows *Homicide: Life on the Street*, based on his own book of narrative journalism *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, published in 1991. That book was adapted into a long-running series for NBC. While critically acclaimed, it suffered throughout its run from poor ratings and was occasionally tied in with the more conventional ratings winner, *Law and Order*, through crossover episodes.

However, even within the confines of network television, *Homicide* strained against generic constraints as it showed something of the world that would be explored more fully in *The Wire*. Many episodes did indeed center upon Detective Pembleton and his attempts to break suspects in the box (interrogation room) by virtue of his superior intellect. It also drew into the audience's purview the political wrangling whereby the least deserving police were promoted and integrity





... and from *The Wire*.



Contrasts: crime lab from *CSI* / ...



... and from *The Wire*.

punished in a numbers game that turned detection into an annual balance sheet so that economic priorities constantly hindered effective police work. The status quo was not a harmonious one. In *The Wire* such resolution as there is is achieved in the face of institutional hostility and demand for media-friendly drug busts. As often occurred in *Homicide*, drug dealers and murderers are charged, but do not always face justice, regaining their liberty via plea bargains or investigative irregularities.

*The Wire* also takes aim at the seemingly omnipotent and omniscient *CSI*-type police procedurals, where the labor of detection is effectively reduced to a glamorized quasi-science pursued by investigators dressed like fashion models in designer clothes and hairdos and working in crime labs that look like night clubs. In contrast, an early episode of *The Wire* shows detectives waiting at a crime scene for forensic investigators, who are tied up with the theft of a city councilman's lawn furniture, while the corpse is decaying. On another occasion, the evidence for multiple murders is inappropriately amalgamated because a temp has failed to understand the meaning of "et al." Most consequentially, in season five McNulty contrives a serial killer scenario through manipulation of forensic evidence (after discovering that post-mortem bruising can be mistaken for strangulation) in a convoluted scheme to get funding for real police work. The crime lab itself is down at the heel and its personnel look like ordinary working people dressed for a days work not for a catwalk.

Highlighting the gulf between *The Wire* and more conventional cop shows is an anecdote told by actor Andre Royo (Bubbles), recounting his experience on *Law and Order*:

"In one scene, the cops come to my house because someone is killed and I have the weapon there. While we were shooting, I saw an open hallway and I ran out. And the director yelled 'Cut' and said, 'We're not as smart as *The Wire*. On our show, you put your hands up and get handcuffed.'"[6]

*The Sopranos* offers another point of comparison, as an HBO production that also took crime drama into new territory, where the story unfolded in such a way as to open out into a commentary on contemporary culture. That series took moral ambiguity to a whole new level. In speaking of *The Sopranos*, David Simon has praised this aspect of the show and said that he himself is not interested in good and evil.[7] However, despite what he says, the series itself, as well as his other utterances in interviews, belie this. While *The Wire* casts virtually every character in a stance of moral compromise and shows sympathy for criminals, it nevertheless has a strong moral compass and does not seduce its audience into moral dissolution as *The Sopranos* arguably does. *The Wire* constantly raises the question of a moral code, even if along unconventional lines, and challenges its audience to moral reflection.

"Storytelling that speaks to

## our current condition"

Breaking from genre norms on many levels, *The Wire* has gone beyond even the best of previous police procedurals. It has set out to create something more panoramic and more provocative: "storytelling that speaks to our current condition, that grapples with the basic realities and contradictions of our immediate world,"[8] that presents a social and political argument. It is a drama about politics, sociology and macroeconomics.[9]

The drama unfolds in the space "wedged between two competing American myths." The first is the free market rags-to-riches success story:

"if you are smarter ... if you are shrewd or frugal or visionary, if you build a better mousetrap, you will succeed beyond your wildest imagination."[10]

The second is that

"if you are not smarter ... or clever or visionary, if you never do build a better mousetrap ... if you are neither slick nor cunning, yet willing to get up every day and work your ass off ... you have a place ... and you will not be betrayed."

According to Simon, it is "no longer possible even to remain polite on this subject. It is ... a lie."[11] The result is an economic and existential crisis.

Much TV drama has shown the slippage in the grip of these myths but still remains in thrall to them. *The Wire* has broken more decisively from such a mythology as it explores the social crisis resulting from a world in which many people will not succeed or necessarily even survive, even if they are smart or honest or hard working, indeed they might even be doomed because they are. In fact, in the current atmosphere of economic crisis, such slippage will accelerate. *The Wire* can be read as a realization that the U.S. must come to terms with the fact of its descent in the world. Neither the nation itself nor its individual citizens can go on pretending.

## "Capitalism is Zeus."

Rarely, if ever, has a television drama constructed a narrative with such a strong thrust toward metanarrative. That is, its stories point toward a larger story. Its intricate and interwoven storylines dramatize the dialectical interaction between individual aspirations and institutional dynamics. These build into the larger story of a city, not only the story of Baltimore in its particularity, but with a metaphoric drive toward the story of Every City. Every character and storyline pulses with symbolic resonance radiating out to a characterization of the nature of contemporary capitalism. While the text itself does not name the system, the metatext does so with extraordinary clarity and force. David Simon, the primary voice of this collective creation, has engaged in a powerfully polemical discourse articulating the worldview that underlies the drama. The metanarrative, the story about the story, is implicit



Baltimore = Everycity.

within the drama, but explicit in the discourse surrounding the drama, going way beyond that of any previous TV drama.

Shakespearean is a term often used to describe what is perceived as quality television drama and it has been used to describe *The Wire*. David Simon is, however, quick to correct his interviewers with regard to its dramatic provenance:

"*The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces. It's the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no decent reason." [12]

This larger theme recurs across numerous interviews: *The Wire* is not a drama about individuals rising above institutions to triumph and achieve redemption and catharsis. It is a drama where those institutions thwart the ambitions and aspirations of those they purportedly exist to serve. It is a drama where individuals with hubris enough to challenge this dynamic invariably become mocked, marginalized or crushed by forces indifferent to their efforts or to their fates. It is a drama where truth and justice are often defeated as deceit and injustice are rewarded.

Of all the forces in motion — in politics, education, law and media — most crucial are the macroeconomic forces, which underpin and determine the operation of the other institutions. For David Simon:

"Capitalism is the ultimate god in *The Wire*. Capitalism is Zeus." [13]

The worldview underlying ancient Greek tragedy is one in which individuals do not control the world. They are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. This is akin to Marx and Engels' anatomization of capitalism as a sorcerer who

"is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells." [14]

The hidden hand of the market is as capable of "hitting people in the ass for no decent reason" as the capricious deities of ancient tragedy. It is a drama of fated protagonists, a rigged game, where there is no happy-ever-after ending.

## "Balzac of Baltimore"

Literary references abound in the discourse surrounding the series. Explaining why he thinks it to be the best series in the history of television, Jacob Weisberg argues:

"No other program has ever done anything remotely like what this one does, namely to portray the social, political, and economic life of an American city with the scope, observational precision, and moral vision of great literature ... The drama repeatedly cuts from the top of Baltimore's social structure to its bottom, from political fund-raisers in



the white suburbs to the subterranean squat of a homeless junkie .... *The Wire's* political science is as brilliant as its sociology. It leaves *The West Wing*, and everything else television has tried to do on this subject, in the dust." [15]

The 19th century realist novel often comes into the analysis. The word Dickensian peppers numerous articles and reviews. Indeed within the drama itself, much irony surrounds the phrase "the Dickensian aspect" used in the newsroom to capture their aspirations for their coverage of homelessness. A corner boy, Bodie, uses the words "Charles Dickens" as a euphemism for penis. Critics have also made reference to Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Zola and Balzac.



David Simon: "If I had a plan, it was to grow old on the *Baltimore Sun's* copy desk, bumming cigarettes from young reporters and telling lies about what it was like working with HL Mencken and William Manchester."



The writers: (L-R) George Pelecanos, Ed Burns and David Simon in public interview at the Museum of Television and Radio.

The blog Scandalum Magnatum posted an entry on Simon entitled "Balzac of Baltimore," arguing that Balzac, Marx's favorite novelist, sought to portray society in all its aspects, always thinking of it as a whole, showing how it was falling apart at the hands of the rising bourgeoisie. As Engels observed of Balzac, although his sympathies were with the class doomed to extinction, there was more to be learned from his fiction than from all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together. [16] In building a whole world, *The Wire* rivals the breadth of vision of the realist masterworks. It too anchors its sympathies in a class doomed to extinction, living in the shadows of the "brown fields and rotting piers and rusting factories," [17] "dead-ended at some strip-mall cash register," [18] "shrugged aside by the vagaries of unrestrained capitalism." [19]

David Simon began his working life as a print journalist, a crime reporter on the *Baltimore Sun*, then wrote factual books before becoming a TV writer and producer. His principal co-writer, Ed Burns, a Vietnam veteran, became a homicide detective and then a social studies teacher. Burns teamed up with Simon in 1993 to write the book *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (1997), later made into an HBO miniseries. These two writers had a central influence on the world of *The Wire*. Other writers also contributed to the series' common vision — to portray "the other America." [20] Of particular note are George Pelecanos (DC quartet of crime novels), Richard Price (*Clockers*) and Dennis Lehane (*Mystic River*). Simon has favorably compared *Clockers* to Steinbeck's naturalist *Grapes of Wrath*. [21] And concomitantly Lehane recounts his initial reaction to *Clockers* in terms that could equally apply to *The Wire*:

"It just rattled me to my core. Reading it I remember feeling ... this, right here — is literature. This is what it's supposed to do. It's supposed to go out into a part of the world ... where few dare venture and return with a testament." [22]

Crucial to what makes a narrative outstanding is usually a thrust toward metanarrative. Such multifaceted works are often shaped by an intent to portray a wide social panorama at a particular moment in history. In this instance, *The Wire* dramatizes a postindustrial U.S. rustbelt city. The different seasons could be described as a series of linked novels. Simon himself has seen in long-form TV drama possibilities akin to those offered by the multi-point-of-view novel "where you get the whole world." [23] The scripts reflect this sense of a cumulative structure and





The other America: Hamsterdam, *The Wire*'s third season experiment in drug legalisation.

are written as chapters, largely devoid of cliff-hanger endings. The HBO cable television model, based on subscription and devoid of ad breaks, frees *The Wire*'s scriptwriters from having to write in fifteen-minute blocks, each segment ending on a mini-climax to hook the viewer in after the commercial. What distinguishes *The Wire* most of all, however, setting it apart even from other high quality HBO productions, is that it is driven by a coherent worldview, by a social and historical analysis. The series signals the return of the grand narrative to the TV screen, but at a level of complexity and nuance never before seen in a television drama.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### "The other America"

Significantly the writers are novelists and journalists who live in close proximity to the experience of "the other America."



The other America: Freamon and McNulty hunt a serial killer.



Show the world: a fire seen from the newsroom of the *Baltimore Sun* goes unreported.



Show the world: a thin line between

"We are none of us from Hollywood; soundstages and backlots and studio commissaries are not our natural habitat ... Consider that for generations now the televised reflection of the American experience — the cathode-ray glow that is our national campfire — has come down to us from on high." [24] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

In Simon's opinion:

"So much of what comes out of Hollywood is horseshit. Because these people live in West LA, they don't even go to East LA ... what they increasingly know about the world is what they see on other TV shows about cops or crime or poverty. The American entertainment industry gets poverty so relentlessly wrong ... Poor people are either the salt of the earth, and they're there to exalt us with their homespun wisdom and their sheer grit and determination to rise up, or they are people to be beaten up in an interrogation room by Sipowicz." [25]

The writers take credibility as their priority. This means, according to Ed Burns, "You've got to know the world ... otherwise it's medical crap here and cop crap there and a love story," all by the numbers. [26]

They are professional writers, so

"it's not some sort of proletariat revolution where longshoremen and drug dealers have seized the means of storytelling, but it's as close as you get to an east coast, rust belt, postindustrial city telling its own story." [27]

Despite their distance from the dominant television industry, these writers have learned the craft of TV drama production impressively. The production is of the highest standard. Nevertheless everything — from the writing to the shooting — is honed to the purpose of showing the world. Even the directorial practice of staying wide in terms of visual composition is shaped to this intent. [28]

The series' visual style highlights social structure. For example, image construction often shows lives constricted by confining spaces, which are then depicted in relation to the larger environment surrounding them. We see characters and events against the backdrop of the city from its grandest views: from executive offices or luxury condos overlooking the harbor. And we also see the windowless basement offices where police monitor wiretaps and the grim abandoned houses where addicts inject heroin. The beauty and space open to some sections of the population always stands in sharp contrast to the ugliness and claustrophobia circumscribing the others. One group cannot exist without the other.

crime and state as Proposition Joe and Stringer Bell meet in the shadow of city hall.

"... who gets paid behind all the tragedy and the fraud."

*The Wire* is

"about untethered capitalism run amok, about how power and money actually route themselves in a postmodern American city, and ultimately, about why we as an urban people are no longer able to solve our problems or heal our wounds." [29]

It is a show in which, the excesses of capitalism are not reduced to the actions of a few proverbial bad apples. As Scandalum Magnatum has argued:

"Most 'progressive' Americans think in terms of 'corporations' rather than 'capital.' The former has people in charge who are evil; the latter is a faceless and diffuse social force, which controls simply by going about its business in a banal and unthinking manner. In not giving capital a face, Simon removes the easy way out." [30]

The detectives constantly come up against a continuum between legitimate and illegitimate capital accumulation. They also continually face attempts to contain and limit the scope of their investigations. As Lieutenant Cedric Daniels observes, when "you follow the drugs, you get a drugs case; you follow the money, you never know where you end up." Detective Lester Freamon suggests that if he could "show who gets paid behind all the tragedy and the fraud," he would die happy. In opposition to a perception of evil corporations, he posits a system in which there is collective culpability:

"We are all of us vested, all of us complicit."

Nevertheless, capitalism, like Zeus, is largely invisible within *The Wire*. Yet, there is a sense in which, like the Greek in season two, it hides in plain sight. The character of the Greek sits in the foreground, silent and unacknowledged, at a café counter while underlings conduct business on his behalf. To David Simon, the Greek "represented capitalism in its purest form." [31] He only becomes a visible actor when his interests are directly threatened. He reappears briefly in the final montage of season five, still sitting in the cafe, still present, still barely observed.

In its main incarnations, however, capitalism remains unseen and unnamed in the drama, but it shapes all that transpires. The commanding heights of the system are off-screen, but nevertheless powerfully present in all that happens on-screen. Capitalism's modus operandi is revealed in multiple details. Market norms and corporate structures are replicated in every social sector — from the drug organizations and the police force through the schools and the newspapers. All micro-struggles for power are shaped by the macro-dynamics of an all-powerful system.

"I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase."

Narco-capitalism is shown as the only viable "economic engine" in neighborhoods where no other path to wealth exists. Those excluded from making a living through the dominant system create their own alternative. For Simon and Burns drug culture provides

"a wealth-generating structure so elemental and enduring that it can legitimately be called a social compact." [32]

An unskilled and poorly educated underclass is trapped between the drug



The unit: following the money and not knowing where they'll end up.



Capitalism in its purest form: The Greek hides in plain sight.





Stringer and Avon in conference with lawyer-laundryman Levy.

economy and the war on drugs. *The Wire* compresses decades of the Baltimore drug trade into its five seasons. In a sense, the way the series depicts the many facets of that trade functions to give us a master class in the history of the capitalist mode of production and accumulation. When Detective Jimmy McNulty observes, "Everything else in this country gets sold without people shooting each other behind it," the irony is implicit. Within legitimate capitalism, the economic system's violence remains largely hidden. Only in the primitive accumulation of the drug economy is violence shown as highly visible and an integral part of the trade.



Spot the parasite: Levy attempts to call Omar to account.

Even within this process, as the scripts develop it, the characters with more power have an impetus to launder the money, to bring greater order and to reduce the overt violence, all the more effectively to accumulate further. For example, a character is developed who provides enormous assistance in this regularizing aspect of capital. He is lawyer Maurice Levy, who defends drug dealers in court, procures their political connections and facilitates their property transactions. Some of the dialogue makes the characters' economic role explicit. Thus, while cross-examining Omar Little, who describes himself as a "rip and run" artist who robs drug dealers, Levy suggests that Omar is a parasite:

"You are amoral, are you not? You're feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You're stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leeches off the culture of drugs."

At this point, Omar interrupts:

"Just like you, man. I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase. It's all in the game though, right?"

The camera shifts to the judge who shrugs in recognition of the irresistible logic. In another scene, Omar is seen sporting a t-shirt emblazoned with "I am the American Dream." The visuals often underline the ironies and incongruities of the situation: the powerless adopting the icons of power with crowns on their t-shirts, drug dealers and murderers wearing crucifixes, a statue of the Virgin Mary on display at the wake of the promiscuous McNulty.



"I am the American dream."

A key figure in the trajectory of transformation from primitive to more advanced accumulation is Stringer Bell, second-in-command of the Barksdale drug organization. When McNulty tails him, the detective finds that Bell's destination is Baltimore City Community College, where the druglord is taking a course on macroeconomics. As Bell progresses in his course and tightens his control of the organization, we see him explicitly applying his lessons to the drug trade. From the start, Bell conceptualizes the process of his group's capital accumulation at a level inaccessible to street dealers:

"Every market-based business runs in cycles. We're in a down cycle now."

Indeed, under Bell's leadership, we see the organization progress from making on-the-fly decisions in the grubby back room of a strip club, to holding formal meetings in a funeral home according to *Robert's Rules of Order*, to forming a cartel that meets in an upmarket hotel conference facility laid out as a corporate





McNulty's wake: There's at least one virgin in the room.

boardroom. He comes to recognize that the traditional goal of controlling territory is meaningless if the group distributes bad product. Moreover, it's the fight for the territory that brings the bodies and the bodies that bring the police, which forces dealers off the streets, affecting productivity and profits. Eventually Bell uses illegal profits to buy legal property. He strives to mix with the movers and shakers of the propertied class, bribe politicians, accumulate further capital, and integrate into the dominant system. When police enter his upscale apartment, the camera settles on a book McNulty pulls down from the shelf: Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. McNulty ponders who it was that they were chasing.



Stringer Bell: model student.



The evolution of capital accumulation: primitive.



The evolution of capital accumulation: intermediate.



The evolution of capital accumulation: advanced.



*The Wealth of Nations*: Stringer and



*The Wealth of Nations* — McNulty:

Avon on top of the world just before  
their empire crumbled.

"Who the fuck were we chasing?"

## "The game is rigged."

Ultimately however, Stringer Bell is felled by hubris. Despite or perhaps because of his education, he fails to see the true nature of the system that confronts him. Bell takes his lessons in economics at face value. Consequently he is conned out of millions of dollars by the corrupt state senator, Clay Davis. Simultaneously, he is betrayed by his own group's ostensible leader, Avon Barksdale, recently released from prison and unimpressed by Bell's more businesslike attempts to reform the drug trade. Avon stands for a more traditional criminal subculture in contrast to the technocratic approach espoused by Stringer. Barksdale is "just a gangster," who believes in holding territory for its own sake. He poses as a community leader, serving food at a cook-out and financing a boxing club. When Barksdale enforcer Dennis "Cutty" Wise finds himself repelled by the violence he encounters on his return from prison, Avon allows him to walk away. It is finally family loyalty that seals Stringer's fate, for Avon discovers that Stringer ordered Avon's nephew D'Angelo's death. That family loyalty is seen to be hollow, however, despite the Sopranoesque code articulated by the Barksdales, as it is coerced family loyalty that really betrayed D'Angelo and led to his death. It is D'Angelo's own mother, Avon's sister, who pressurizes him not to give testimony that would have told the truth and given him some kind of alternative life.



Marlo in the inner circle: one of their own.

Ironically, it is Marlo Stanfield, successor to the Barksdale organization, who reaps the rewards of Stringer Bell's business education. Marlo also understands that it is the bodies that bring the police, but rather than eradicate the violence, he hides the bodies, rendering the violence invisible. Unlike Avon Barksdale, Marlo views any wavering of commitment, such as that represented by Cutty, as a threat to be eliminated. In the end, Marlo achieves everything that Stringer wanted, but has no idea of where to go with it. He meets with the city powers at a reception in a highrise office block, looking out across the city that they each in their different ways control. The contrast with Stringer is striking, as Stringer was never truly admitted to the circles of power. Rather, he was forced to meet with property developers in restaurants, or he was restricted to the lobby of corporate tower blocks while Clay Davis claimed to spend graft money on his behalf. For all of his frequent callousness, Stringer believed he could tame the system. Marlo stands on the verge of admission to the inner circle, his extreme ruthlessness seemingly marking him out as one of its own. However he cannot find a place for himself there and descends into back the streets, now belonging in neither place.



Stringer looks to Clay Davis to safeguard his interests.

Most characters do not usually understand the nature of the system in which they live and work. Yet even those with least education and least mobility sometimes have their moments of insight. As Zinovia, sitting in a discussion group in a high school program for difficult pupils, remarks:

"We got our thing, but it's just part of the big thing."

Namond Brice, sitting in the same circle, exposes the hypocrisy of moral outrage over the drug trade by drawing parallels with Enron, the use of steroids and the tobacco industry. In another moment, street dealer Wallace, speculating on the provenance of chicken nuggets, decides that whoever invented them must be rich, but D'Angelo corrects him. They were invented by "some sad ass" in the basement of McDonalds, D'Angelo explains, while the real players made all the money. The sad ass is still in the basement, working for a wage, thinking up ways to make fries taste better. When someone expresses moral outrage,





D'Angelo schools Bodie and Wallace:  
"The king stay the king."



Writer Richard Price in cameo.



D'Angelo Barksdale: "There are no  
second acts in American lives."

D'Angelo counters,

"It ain't about right. It's about money."

When D'Angelo attempts to school Wallace and Bodie in the game of chess, he also uses the metaphor of the drug trade. The king stays the king, protected, like Avon Barksdale. The queen is like Stringer — "the go get shit done piece" who has all the moves. Pawns are soldiers. They are expendable and get "capped" quickly. Unless, as Bodie observes, "they some smart ass pawns." Later, in a conversation with McNulty the nature of narco-capitalism becomes apparent to Bodie, who realizes,

"The game is rigged. We like them little bitches on the chess board."

The institutional structures of this rigged game are replicated in the police force and the organisations they pursue. McNulty and Bodie develop a grudging respect for each other in their mutual attempts to do a good job in their respective sectors. In season four the two share something of a heart to heart conversation about their roles in organizations that are either indifferent or openly hostile to their efforts. Bodie becomes disillusioned after the Barksdale organization is destroyed by Stringer's death and Avon's incarceration. He is forced to sell drugs for Marlo, who has taken Stringer's technocratic tendencies to their callous extreme. Even though Bodie killed his friend Wallace on Stringer's orders, he is repulsed by the arbitrary killings and Marlo's disregard for his own workers, remarking,

"I do what I gotta ... just don't ask me to live on my fuckin' knees."

In one of a number of revealing encounters between cops and criminals, McNulty recognizes elements of himself in this corner boy and says to him,

"You're a soldier, Bodie."

**"How do you get from here to  
the rest of the world?"**

The corner boys come from an underclass severely circumscribed by conditions of life. The youth provide an inexhaustible labor supply for the drug organizations and can hardly imagine being other than they are and doing other than they do. Yet sometimes they try. They reach beyond, usually groping in the dark. D'Angelo Barksdale, born into the drugs trade and given a preordained role in it, is never offered a hint of an alternative path, no matter how ill-suited he is to his assigned role. On several occasions, he speaks of being unable to breathe, of wanting "to go somewhere where I can breathe." In prison, he participates in a reading group operating under the custodianship of novelist and screenwriter Richard Price, in a cameo appearance. This is the nearest D'Angelo comes to breathing. Ironically, tragically, he is killed in the library. Even more ironically, the reading group had just been discussing F. Scott Fitzgerald's assertion, "There are no second acts in American lives." D'Angelo's interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* is that "the past is always with us" and that "what came first is who you really are."

Similarly, in our view of the police force, we follow Roland Pryzbylewski, coerced onto a career path for which he has no aptitude by his police major father-in-law, as a hopeless street cop who develops a talent for electronic surveillance and breaks the Barksdale communication code. On the docks, we see similar cases with working class youth. For example, Ziggy Sobotka has none of the qualities appropriate to being a docker or trade unionist, yet he is doomed to flounder around ridiculously in that world. By contrast, his cousin Nicky has



Cutty and Dukie: Which way to the rest of the world?

all that it would take, if only the world in which such skill mattered weren't disintegrating all around him and so he shames himself, his family and his union by taking up the drug trade.

Although such failure is found in all strata of society, it is the black underclass who have the most difficulty and the least room for maneuver. Season four depicts poor youth even earlier in the life cycle, taking us into their schools and homes. Duquan "Dukie" Weems is the son of hopeless junkies who sell his clothes and abandon him when they are evicted. He begins to blossom in school but cannot find his way after that. He tries working the corners, then looking for a proper job, but nothing works out for him. He asks Cutty Wise, the boxing coach:

"How do you get from here to the rest of the world?"

Cutty confesses that he doesn't know how either. Neither character ever does find out.

There are rare moments of redemption. Namond Brice, teenage son of a top player in the Barksdale organization, is pushed by his mother to fill the shoes of his imprisoned father. He comes under the wing of a cop turned teacher-social-worker, who eventually adopts him, and he thrives, becoming an articulate speaker in a debating competition. Unlike in more conventional TV drama, usually structured around such individual triumph against social obstacles, this youth's outcome is shown as marginal. Namond's transition to a secure, ordered environment is narratively contrasted with Randy Wagstaff's arrival at a group foster home and the approaching violence as that boy is marked out as a snitch. Sergeant Carver, having attempted unsuccessfully to foster Randy himself, pounds his car horn in anger and despair as he leaves the boy there to a predictable fate.

Of the four pupils foregrounded in season four, three come to tragic ends. Michael Lee, the strongest and smartest, goes into drug dealing at first to bear the burden of a child rearing a child. When we first encounter him as a pupil, he is already acting as parent to his younger brother Bug. When the situation at home worsens, he takes on the role of breadwinner to put a roof over the head of his brother away from his junkie mother and Bug's abuser father. Appalled by the violence entailed in selling drugs, especially when he realizes that his own organization is about to kill him, he adopts his own moral code and switches trades to become a stick-up artist robbing drug crews. Randy, brutalized in the group home, in turn becomes brutalizer. The home at first looks not so bad as the talk about it would have made us believe. Then, when the police and social workers leave, we see Randy surrounded to be beaten by the other boys as a "snitch bitch." After an interval, when Detective Moreland comes to the home to interview him, the gentle boy has become tough. He is uncooperative, storms out and casually assaults another boy on the stairs. Finally, in one of the saddest scenes of the whole series, we see the third teen, Dukie, settling into a homeless camp and shooting up.



Namond: now at the podium instead of the corner.



Randy Wagstaff: no way out.





Michael and Bug: a child raising a child.



Dukie (right) finally finds a way out.

## "The fewer we need"

These children are the discarded surplus of a world in which capital has triumphed over labor. According to David Simon:

"Every day, human beings are worth less. That is the triumph of capital. ... The more we become post-industrial, the fewer we need."  
[33]

In season two, which focuses on the waterfront, the marginally employed dockers see a media presentation depicting the use of robotics at the port of Rotterdam, a chilling vision of the future where there will be even less use for their labor.

What becomes clear through viewing all four seasons of *The Wire* is that the triumph of capital over labor is accentuated by the triumph of finance capital over manufacturing capital. Ironically, the economic sphere in *The Wire* that comes closest to producing a commodity and offering full time employment is narco-capitalism. The dockers are on their way down in the world, existing on five or six days paid work a month. They have been reduced to smuggling, bribing and drug dealing. In the larger picture, they are pitched worker against worker, with Baltimore competing directly with other ports for survival. All the workers have to offer is their superior labor, undermined by the criminal activities to which they turn for short-term survival. They are merely one link in a global distribution chain, in which everything from cars to guns to dope to women can be imported cheaply from overseas. Union leader Frank Sobotka succinctly summarizes the situation:

"We used to make shit in this country, build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy's pocket."

Catastrophically Frank Sobotka accepts the dominant system's logic. He hires a lobbyist, using the proceeds of smuggling operations to bribe politicians. Union militancy is absent in a situation where there are few jobs to defend and where workers are effectively reduced to fighting over scraps. Season two is an exploration of what a union does when its *raison d'être* is dying.



Season 2: labour triumphant in a monument to better times.



Season 2: the triumph of capital over labour.



The future of cargo is one without dockers.



Get it cheaper overseas: the cold dead face of globalization.



Frank Sobotka: a flawed, heroic but ultimately doomed protagonist.



"They used to make steel there, yes?"

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### "Juking the stats"



Comstat: numbers-driven policing.

The political structure, as portrayed in *The Wire*, has adopted the priorities of finance capitalism. Commodity value is consistently prioritized over use value. The public sector has become increasingly impoverished — to the point where it cannot meet basic needs — while money accumulates in other sectors, particularly in the drug trade, beyond any possible need or use. For example, drug lord Marlo has no idea what to do with all the wealth he has amassed, although he does invest in the future loyalty of his prospective workers by handing out money for new school clothes in the manner of a feudal lord dispensing favors. Meanwhile the public sphere remains stripped of resources. Politicians cut budgets, and police and teachers cut corners on the job and go into debt at home.

To defend their declining position, educational and legal institutions adopt prevailing modes of justification so that public services appear to produce little in the way of real results. The school system struggles but fails to educate, and the police force strives but fails to reduce crime. This environment seems to produce nothing of market value, so how is performance in the social sector to be measured? Paradoxically, the measurement that exists cloaks the lack of meaningful performance. Even further, producing the metrics disincentivises meaningful performance. The street riots drain time and energy from policing, which should be targeting the powerful players and the causes of crime. Teaching to the test does the same with respect to education, which should be opening the mind to the world.

From the first episode, this kind of dilemma is made starkly clear. McNulty, after talking to a judge, unwittingly brings to the bosses' attention a series of related murders linked to the Barksdales. The detective is reprimanded in the harshest terms for violating the chain of command. However, what most disturbs the head of the homicide division, Major Rawls, is the fact that McNulty uses as evidence one of the murders from the previous year, which would therefore have no bearing on the current year's case-solved statistics.

The massaging of crime figures is clearly illustrated in *The Wire*, where it is regularly described as "juking the stats." In season three we are introduced to COMSTAT meetings. Via Powerpoint slides, police give figures to suggest there are now decreases in crime. Since police at all levels, from the commissioner down, are often berated and even demoted for their failures, they defend themselves by finding ways to reclassify crimes, making aggravated assaults into common assaults, and effectively doing everything but make bodies disappear. Sometimes policemen even try that. When the bodies concealed by the Stanfield gang are discovered, the homicide sergeant suggests to the detective that





Anti-terrorism seminar: "Brownie, you're doing one heck of a job."



Teaching seminar: IALAC on screen = "I Am Lovable And Capable."

he might want to leave them where they are, as there are only three weeks left in the year and the unit clearance rate is already under 50%.

Other relevant metrics play a role, as well as the year and body count. For example, some dead bodies are discovered in a location with a zip code that doesn't matter — a statistic with strong undercurrents of race and class. As the cops put it, dozens of black, poor bodies in Baltimore count for less than one white suburban ex-cheerleader in Aruba. Such a conversation takes place in the local newsroom as well. In other instances, overtime pay can become a metric, as one lazy detective insists that "cases go from red to black via green." [34] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

The tyranny of numbers extends beyond the police department. When Roland Pryzbylewski is dismissed from the police force for accidentally shooting a black officer, he becomes a public school teacher. Sitting in a meeting to discuss how to "teach the test" for the forthcoming "no child left behind" standardized tests, he experiences a flash of recognition. "Juking the stats," he comments to a colleague, explaining:

"You juke the stats and majors become colonels. I've been here before."

Manipulating teaching procedures just to achieve adequate test scores parallels manipulating crime statistics at COMSTAT. The progress made by Pryzbylewski's own unconventional teaching methods, and by an experimental programme designed to resocialize troubled children, is eviscerated. In a succession of scenes ironically juxtaposed against each other, the high school's seminar on a teaching strategy for the test is edited against a police meeting on anti-terrorism.

There is a constant tension in the series between those who want to do the job well and those who want to climb the career ladder, even though this usually means doing the job badly. We see it play out over and over, whether between cops, politicians, lawyers, teachers or journalists. Conversely, there is no career ladder for the dockers of season two.

The police are the most sustained presence in the series. Characters such as Freamon, McNulty, Daniels, and Greggs have a commitment to building strong but difficult cases, tracing how the money and power are routed. However, these officers are constantly under pressure from those higher up the chain of command, who are in turn under pressure from city hall, to produce easy street rips that will produce arrests and drug seizures. That's the kind of police action known to generate enthusiastic press conferences and impressive crime stats. Under such pressure, Daniels worries that one generation is training the next how





The decline of community: Omar and Bunk lock horns.

*not* to do the job.

The good guys do not win. By the end of the series some of the best police must go — Daniels, McNulty, Freamon, Colvin — while the worst thrive — Valchek, Rawls, Burrell. Yet some — Greggs, Moreland, Carver — also survive and try to do another decent day's work. The police exhibit the same moral ambiguity as does society as a whole. The venal but eloquent Sergeant Landsman reflects:

"We are policing a culture of moral decline."

## "We had us a community."

Not that any character believes in a past golden age, but citizens at neighborhood meetings do articulate fond memories of chatting with the cop on the beat when both knew each others' names and stories. Various characters contrast the present with a past time of productivity and community. For example, a striking confrontation between past and present comes in an exchange between outlaw Omar Little and Detective Bunk Moreland. Bunk calls Omar to account for the decline of the neighborhood where they both grew up:

"As rough as that neighbourhood could be, we had us a community... And now all we got is bodies. And predatory motherfuckers like you. And out where that girl fell, I saw kids acting like Omar, calling you by name, glorifying your ass. Makes me sick, motherfucker, how far we done fell."

This is paralleled by another scene between cop and criminal. Ex-major Colvin, when visiting Wee-Bay Brice in prison to ask for custody of the prisoner's son, gets into a conversation where they both recall the west side they once knew and contrast it to what they see now: a place without family, code, respect. The difference between what places were and are and how different characters have experienced this change is marked in a myriad of ways. Thus, Deputy Commissioner Daniels visits a hall where dead bodies from vacant houses have been brought to be processed, and he remembers that he went to school there.

Unemployment, underemployment, the priorities of the stats game, and the victory of rampant capitalism have destroyed not only this older world that made sense, but the prescriptive narratives and solidarities that grew from it. The labor movement, the black power movement and the ideals of empowerment through education have all been debased and eviscerated. Economist Marcellus Andrews has suggested:

"The end of the American segregation system a half century ago put black people onto the blue-collar road to the middle class just when the on-ramp shut down." [35]

47% of black males in Baltimore are unemployed. The police in this scenario are caught between enforcing a war on drugs that has become a



Landsman: dominating a dark corner of an Irish bar.



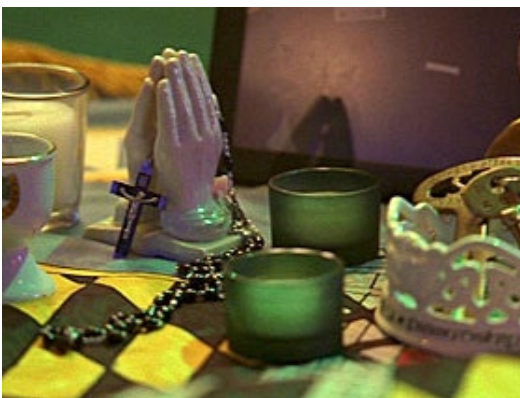
Detective Ray Cole: a life in pictures.



Ray Cole.



Ray Cole.



McNulty: He needs more than prayers at this point.

war on the underclass and containing the chaos unleashed by it.[36]

## "Sharing a dark corner of the American experiment"

Some of the scenes where we see most clearly the identity, contradictions and solidarity of the police subculture and its relation to the wider culture are at the wakes for dead policemen. The ritual usually involves going to an Irish bar, laying out the corpse on a pool table, drinking whiskey, singing *The Body of an American* (The Pogues) and eulogizing the dead cop.

Discussing the dead policeman at Cole's wake, one of the most memorable scenes in the series, Homicide Sergeant Landsman characterizes the characters' lives as "sharing a dark corner of the American experiment." In a montage of brief shots, the character of Cole, the Irish cop, is visually reconstructed. Some of the elements in the mise-en-scene are contradictory, even outlandish. On a pool table draped with a police flag are arranged a photo of the dead officer in dress uniform, rosary beads hanging over one corner and a St. Bridget's cross lying in front of it. A shot of a bottle of Jameson Irish whiskey held in the corpse's left hand cuts quickly to a close-up of the wedding ring on his third finger. Shots of cuff links, cigars and tie follow in quick succession before settling briefly on his police shield. The figure of Cole as a symbol of policing, albeit a chaotic and contradictory one, is thus established, a perception heightened by Landsman's observation that he was neither the world's greatest cop nor its worst. Neither was he the world's greatest husband nor the worst. A wider angled shot during the eulogy completes the picture: a candle, a celtic cross and a statue of the Virgin Mary.

The incongruity of these elements is replicated even more forcefully at the seeming wake held for McNulty when he leaves the police force. He is symbolically dead, having left the brotherhood. Ironically for this uniquely promiscuous and self-destructive detective, the table is positively cluttered with religious kitsch, including votive candles and plaster hands draped with a rosary, alongside the obligatory bottle of Jameson and statue of the Virgin Mary. The verbose and articulate Landsman is momentarily lost for words, but he must ultimately admit to a grudging respect for the "dead" detective, the black sheep. In the only positive words he ever spoke to or about McNulty, Landsman declares that if his own body were found lying dead on the street, there is no one he would rather have standing over him investigating the case than McNulty.

[Go to page 4](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The *Baltimore Sun* newsroom: a real newspaper?



Scott Templeton: a deserving winner?

Season five takes as its theme the mass media. Journalists too find themselves inhabiting a dark corner of the American experiment. They too find themselves in a different relation to the city from what they once had. Beset by pressures of bylines, deadlines and prizes alongside problems created by cutbacks, out-of-town ownership, buyouts of the most experienced staff and declining circulation, reporters find themselves disconnected from the city they are charged to report. Some go for the fast track to promotion and prizes, undercutting the process of building long-term knowledge of long-term situations, establishing contacts, creating trust, and understanding more of the context in which they operate.

Simon believes that the indifferent logic of Wall Street has poisoned relations between newspapers and their cities. The management of the *Baltimore Sun*, as represented in the series, is preoccupied with gaining Pulitzer prizes. The newspaper's formula, according to Simon, is this:

"Surround a simple outrage, overreport it, claim credit for breaking it, make sure you find a villain, then claim you effected change as a result of your coverage." [37] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Much journalism focuses on the symptoms rather than the disease, which Simon compares to coming to a house hit by a hurricane and making voluminous notes on the displaced roof tiles. One type of story is "small, self-contained and has good guys and bad guys," whereas the other is informed by a bigger picture and a longer history and reveals what is happening in society. [38]

In *The Wire* we see the marginalization of journalists who know the city and write about it with high standards for accuracy and context. They face the work of other journalists who are cutting corners and going for the glittering prizes, sometimes even at the expense of the true story. Thus the character Scott Templeton, who gets into the habit of making up what he can't find, is lionized by his managing editors and wins a Pulitzer Prize. Those who start to wonder and check the facts, particularly the honourable and meticulous city editor, Gus Haynes, are undermined. Thus, this plotline mirrors what happens in the police force, school system and city hall.

*The Wire* has a thoughtful scene structure that plays out across its various seasons. Throughout the series, some scenes parallel each other almost exactly. For example, in one episode a cop vents his frustration and remarks that he would like to experience what it would be like to work in "a real police department." Later in the same episode we hear a journalist lament that he would like someday to find out what it would be like to work in "a real newspaper." In city hall and in the school system, we hear echoes of the same regret and aspiration. While cops

and journalists both speak from within the restricted viewpoints of their respective jobs, the viewer is aware of the grander narrative sweep. The problems these workers identify are not isolated and unconnected but part of a deeper systemic logic that pervades all such institutions and encumbers all of their efforts. Each season ends with a stylish and stirring montage that pulls together the various storylines and projects them into the immediate future, leaving the viewer pondering the storylines' outcomes and reflecting on their causes and consequences.

In the newspaper plotline, the conflict is not just about the stories that the reporters get wrong for one reason or another, but about the fact that they fail to get at all the major stories that dominate the drama, things which the viewers but not the reporters understand. That, according to Simon, is the "big ass elephant in our mythical newsroom." [39] The reporters do not uncover the stories about juking the stats on crime or education. They do not reveal that this is being driven by city hall or that the mayor is reverting to the practices he pledged to reform. They do not probe the connections between property transactions and political corruption. They have no idea of how the drugs trade works. The death of Proposition Joe, a major player in East Baltimore drugs, is relegated to the inside pages and the death of Omar, a semi-mythic figure in West Baltimore, is bumped from the paper altogether.



Bubbles: tour guide to the underworld.

We do see the underworld of drug addiction and homelessness as pursued by two different journalists in diametrically opposed ways. One inflates his investigation and pitches it for career advancement. The other looks and listens carefully and opens that world through a life story sensitively told.

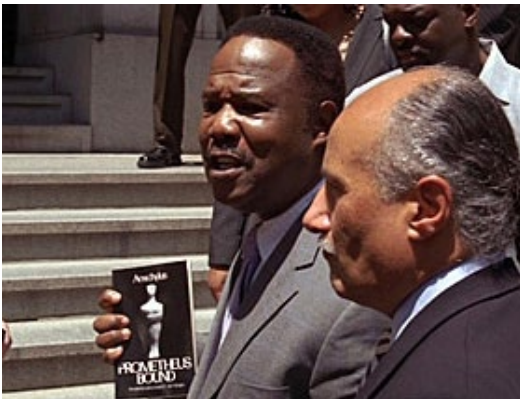
In depicting the world of print journalism, the script provides a strong sense of social decline, driven by the Simon's own experience of reporting for the *Baltimore Sun* and then following its transformation over the past few decades. In one scene, two journalists remember why they wanted to be newspapermen. One recalls seeing his father read the paper every morning at breakfast so thoroughly and intently that the child wanted to be part of something so important as to require that sort of concentrated attention. Another told of a man whom he saw on the bus every day and how that man folded his paper in sections and read it with such great care. There is a sense of a loss of coherence in a society where the daily newspaper was once part of a wider workaday ritual.



## "That black pride bullshit"



Carcetti: "We will protect you!"



Clay Davis: bringing light to the common people, one electricity bill at a time.

Another absence, also evoking a sense of social decline, is political protest. We see little organized opposition to the deindustrialisation and demoralization of the city and to the macroeconomic forces driving the city's decline. The protests we do see are effectively stunts, stage-managed from the top. On one occasion new mayor Tommy Carcetti is seeking to divert attention from the failings of the law enforcement and education systems. He exploits a growing sense of outrage surrounding an apparent spate of homeless murders by organizing a candlelight vigil outside city hall. By this masterful piece of politicking, he can place the blame for homelessness on federal and state administrations, both Republican, as opposed to the Democratic city administration. Carcetti knows better than what he does. On one occasion, he anticipates what his advisor is thinking by invoking the injunction about speaking truth to power.[40]

On another occasion, when Clay Davis, corrupt state senator, goes on trial, he manages to transform the accusation of gross corruption to self-defense against a racist witch-hunt. He presents himself as a beneficent patron of the city's black poor, his pockets never full for long, as he hears his constituents' troubles and pays their bills. He arrives at the courthouse carrying a copy of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, the tale of

"a simple man, who was horrifically punished by the powers that be for the terrible crime of trying to bring light to the common people."

In the courtroom, drawing on the rhetoric of the civil rights movement, Davis skillfully manipulates the discourses of race and class against his opponents, who, he claims, have no idea how things are for the black poor. He refers to those pulling the strings above the black state attorney. He enlists a corrupt former mayor to his cause, who makes reference to those "persecuting ... our leaders." This courthouse rally culminates in a chorus of *We shall not be moved*. While it is apparent that significant sections of the black political establishment are engaged in graft, the enduring and systemic character of inequality enables them to draw on a radical tradition and to distort it to nefarious ends.

The spirit of the 60s finds such echoes elsewhere in *The Wire*. Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell regularly use the black power handshake. In one conversation Avon refers teasingly to their youthful enthusiasm for "that black pride bullshit." Brother Mouzone, an enforcer brought from New York to Baltimore by the Barksdales, is a ruthless gun for hire, whose appearance evokes Malcolm X, but he is without substance. He prides himself on reading *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harpers*, but how he relates the political debates in them to his role as enforcer in the drugs trade is unclear. A philosophy of collective liberation has morphed into a Hobbesian war of all against all. For all their talk of being brothers, Avon and Stringer have already betrayed



Brother Mouzone is no Brother Malcolm.



Election day: *Move on up*.



Out with the old.

each other and Avon has set in motion the murder of Stringer.

This tradition of black radicalism is sometimes evoked in a more positive way. When Cutty Wise is released from prison and finally escapes the drug trade to open a community boxing club, his new optimism is underlined during an election day jog, accompanied on his walkman by Curtis Mayfield's *Move on up*, a significant moment of scoring in a series that largely eschews the use of a musical soundtrack. Such optimism is undercut, however, when Cutty is canvassed and admits that as a former felon he is barred from voting, a mechanism that further disempowers the underclass.

In this depiction of black Baltimore, echoes of the sixties are weak — considering the scale and dynamism of the upheavals that shook the U.S. and the world in the 1960s and 1970s, when masses marched against war, racism, sexism, imperialism, when there was a longing for liberation, when there was such striving to live in a new way. *The Wire* cannot make present, however, what is absent or attenuated in the wider culture that it represents. The script gives a strong sense that this movement has been both co-opted and defeated. The residue of the civil rights movement seems to have left in Baltimore a lack of confidence in collective action, a lack of faith in alternative possibilities.[41]

## "All the pieces matter."

Contemporary political references abound in the series. The aftermath of 9/11 surfaces in showing how the FBI reordered its priorities from drug investigations to the war on terror. In one instance, an INS agent points out a sign for the Department of Homeland Security and asks McNulty if he feels any different. McNulty admits that he didn't vote in the 2004 election, because neither Bush nor Kerry had any idea of what was going on where he works.

Other plotlines bring in contemporary events. One journalist refers to a call that a colleague supposedly received from a serial killer and remarks that it must be strange to talk to a psychopath. In response, another reminds them that he interviewed Dick Cheney once. Another time, a woman in the city informs an old friend that her sister is working at a school in the county "teaching every nigger to speak like Condoleezza." And as a police seminar on anti-terrorism descends into farce, one officer calls out, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job," a reference to George Bush's infamous post-Katrina comment to the head of FEMA. [42]

Iraq is a recurring point of reference, not only directly, but analogically. The story of a homeless Iraqi war veteran features in the final season. Police patrolling the streets of Baltimore compare the city to Fallujah,





In with the new?

with one recommending the use of air strikes and white phosphorous. Furthermore, the whole war on drugs is meant to mirror the war on terror. One sequence, for example, alludes to the twin towers of 9/11. After the demolition of two housing project towers indirectly triggers a protracted and pointless power struggle, one gangster says, "If it's a lie, then we fight on that lie." [43]

As the series moves to its conclusion, various scenes evoke the beginning. In the final episode, Detective Sydnor meets with Judge Phelan just as McNulty did in the first episode. Detectives go to a crime scene in the low-rises where they find a body in the shadow of the same statue where the body of a witness murdered in season one was found. We see Michael become the new Omar and Dukie become the new Bubbles. The concluding scenes, particularly the final montage, are marshalled to show that the police department, drug trade, school system, newspaper, and city hall all carry on in the same way. No matter what characters have risen or fallen or died, the cycle continues and the system survives.



Silent witness stays the same ...

The series is more diagnostic than prescriptive. Nevertheless, Simon has said that he intends the show to be a political provocation. As interviewers ask what sort of political response he means to provoke, he has replied that he is a not social crusader, claiming to be a storyteller coming to the campfire with truest possible story he can tell. What people do with that story, he says, is up to them. [44] Simon admits he's pessimistic about the possibility of political change since he finds the political infrastructure bought, journalism eviscerated, the working class decimated, and the underclass narcotized. *The Wire* exhibits the "audacity of despair." [45]

While occasionally Simon indicates politicians lack courage to take on real problems, ultimately he sees the problems as rooted in systemic failure. Underlying *The Wire's* story-arc is the conviction that social exclusion and corruption do not exist in spite of the system but because of it. Its scepticism about reform comes from recognizing that substantive social change is not possible "within the current political structure." [46] Simon has declared the series to be about "the decline of the American empire." [47]



... with only a change in camera angle.

No such critique of the U.S. empire is detectable in the most recent production of Simon and Burns on HBO, the Iraq war drama *Generation Kill*. Based on the writings of an embedded journalist, Evan Wright, it stands in strong contrast to *The Wire*. The new miniseries abandons a multi-perspectival structure and systemic critique. It does have some features in common with *The Wire*: the sense of institutional imperatives, a perception-driven bureaucracy, and the conflicting aims of the troops and their commanding officers. The recon marines just want to do their job, while the officers want headline-busting tactical and strategic coups. Yet the script does not question what that job is. The drama is myopic. Despite the fact that Simon and Burns oppose the war, any critique of the war is absent and the system driving the war remains unquestioned in the drama. Furthermore, the voices of Iraqis are all but silent.

While *The Wire* offers a critique of the war on drugs, *Generation Kill* does not offer a critique of the war on Iraq. While it does demonstrate that the war is badly organized and executed, the miniseries gives no sense that the war itself is illegitimate or immoral. It identifies all too fully with the point of view of the soldiers on the ground and indicates that if they were not frustrated by their commanders, they could do a worthwhile job of soldiering well. Hopefully, Simon and Burns' new project *Treme*, set in post-Katrina New Orleans, will be a return to their best work.

## "A Marxist's dream of a series"

*The Wire's* narrative and metanarrative have prompted some commentators to see it as "a Marxist's dream of a series." [48] In a session at the Museum of Television and Radio, Ken Tucker introduced Simon as "the most brilliant Marxist to run a TV show." [49] While Simon did not contradict Tucker, he has elsewhere asserted that he is not a Marxist. When asked if he is a socialist, he has declared that he is a social democrat. He believes that capitalism is the only game in town, that it is not only inevitable but unrivalled in its power to produce wealth.

However he opposes

"raw, unencumbered capitalism, absent any social framework, absent any sense of community, without regard to the weakest and most vulnerable classes in society — it's a recipe for needless pain, needless human waste, needless tragedy." [50]

Simon is for radical redistribution — "no trickle down bullshit" [51] — but not "to each according to his needs" either. [52] Nevertheless, everything in *The Wire* calls for a system requiring from each according to their abilities and giving to each according to their needs.

As to class struggle, characters struggle individually, but there is no sign of concerted class struggle likely to emerge as a counter-force of significant consequence. Simon identifies with the social existentialism of Camus: To commit to a just cause against overwhelming odds is absurd, but not to commit is equally absurd. Only one choice, however, offers the slightest chance for dignity. [53] Simon also refers on a number of occasions to Sisyphus rolling a large rock up a hill. *The Wire* has told a

"darker, more honest story on American television ... indifferent to the calculations of real estate speculators, civic boosters and politicians looking toward higher office." [54]

Simon is "proud of making something that wasn't supposed to exist." [55]

What Simon thinks of Marxism is one thing (and it is not always clear), but what Marxists think of him is another. *The Wire* is a Marxist's idea



The audacity of despair.



David Simon at Loyola University talking about "the decline of the American empire."





David Simon (left) and Ed Burns (right)  
on the set of *Generation Kill*.

of what TV drama should be. Its specific plots open into an analysis of the social-political-economic system shaping the whole. The series has demonstrated the potential of television narrative to dramatize the nature of the social order, a potential that TV drama has long neglected or inadequately pursued.

In probing the parameters of the intricate interactions between multiple individuals and institutions, the complex script, seen over all the seasons, excavates the underlying structures of power and stimulates engagement with overarching ideas. It bristles, even boils over, with systemic critique. While it offers no expectation of an alternative, it provokes reflection on the need for one and an aspiration towards one. It may not have been written by Marxists to dramatize a Marxist worldview, but it is hard to see how a series written on this terrain by Marxists would be much different from *The Wire*.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

[1] *The Wire* was a Home Box Office production.

See <http://www.hbo.com/thewire/>.

The title is meant to refer literally to the wire tap, used in surveillance through the whole series, but also symbolically to the boundary running between different strata of society. [\[return to page 1 of essay\]](#)

[2] *The Wire* "was shot entirely in Baltimore by Baltimore craft and labour unions." David Simon, audio commentary on episode 1.1 (The Target) on *The Wire: The Complete First Season* (HBO Video/Warner Home Video, 2005)

[3] See <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=4969254136607732929>

[4] David Simon, "Introduction" in Rafael Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth Be Told* (New York: Pocket Books, 2004), 2

[5] Meghan O'Rourke, "Behind *The Wire*: David Simon on where the show goes next," *Slate*, December 1, 2006, [http://www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagnum/all/#page\\_start](http://www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagnum/all/#page_start)

[6] Aileen Gallagher, "Andre Royo on Playing Bubbles on 'The Wire,' Snitching, and His Emmy Speech," *Vulture: New York Entertainment*, January 2008, [http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/01/andre\\_royo\\_on\\_playing\\_bubbles.html](http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/01/andre_royo_on_playing_bubbles.html)

[7] David Mills, "Q&A: David Simon (pt 1)," *Undercover Black Man*, January 22, 2007, <http://undercoverblackman.blogspot.com/2007/01/q-david-simon-pt-1.html>

[8] Simon, "Introduction", 4

[9] *ibid*, 8

[10] *ibid*, 5

[11] *ibid*, 5-6

[12] Nick Hornby, "David Simon: Creator-Producer-Writer of HBO's *The Wire*", *The Believer*, August 2007, <http://www.believmag.com/issues/>

[200708/?read=interview\\_simon](http://www.200708/?read=interview_simon)

[13] Eric Ducker, "The Left Behind: Inside *The Wire*'s World of Alienation and Asshole Gods," *Fader*, December 2006,  
<http://www.thefader.com/articles/2006/12/08/listening-in-part-iv>

[14] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* 1848 (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 8.

[15] Jacob Weisberg, "*The Wire* on Fire: Analyzing the best show on television," *Slate*, September 13, 2006,  
<http://www.slate.com/id/2149566/>

[16] Scandalum Magnatum, "Balzac of Baltimore," January 13, 2008,  
<http://scandalum.wordpress.com/2008/01/13/balzac-of-baltimore/>

[17] Simon, "Introduction", 6

[18] *ibid*, 7

[19] *ibid*, 12

[20] Margaret Talbot, "Stealing Life: The crusader behind *The Wire*," *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa\\_fact\\_talbot?printable=true](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot?printable=true)

[21] David Simon, "David Simon on Homicide, Truth and Journalism," *Bay Weekly*, March 12-18, 1998,  
[http://www.bayweekly.com/year98/lead6\\_10.html](http://www.bayweekly.com/year98/lead6_10.html)

[22] Dennis Lehane, "In Retrospect: Dennis Lehane on *Clockers*," *Critical Mass*, February 23, 2008,  
<http://bookcriticscircle.blogspot.com/2008/02/in-retrospect-dennis-lehane-on-clockers.html>

[23] David Simon on *The Tubridy Show* Ireland: RTE Radio 1, January 24, 2008,  
<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/thetubridyshow/1179937.html>

[24] Simon, "Introduction", 10-11 [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]

[25] Talbot

[26] Ed Burns, audio commentary on episode 4.1 (Boys of Summer) on *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season* (HBO Video/Warner Home Video, 2008)

[27] Ducker

[28] Simon, audio commentary on episode 1.1

[29] Hornby

[30] Scandalum Magnatum

[31] O'Rourke

[32] David Simon and Edward Burns, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 58

[33] Mills

[34] On the whiteboard that lists open homicide cases, an open case is marked in red and a closed case in black. [[return to page 3 of essay](#)]

[35] Laurence Lanahan, "Secrets of the City: What *The Wire* reveals about urban journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January-February 2008, [http://www.cjr.org/cover\\_story/secrets\\_of\\_the\\_city.php?page=8](http://www.cjr.org/cover_story/secrets_of_the_city.php?page=8)

[36] Scott Tobias "Interviews: David Simon" *The AV Club*, March 10, 2008, [http://www.avclub.com/content/interview/david\\_simon](http://www.avclub.com/content/interview/david_simon)

[37] *ibid* [[return to page 4 of essay](#)]

[38] *ibid*

[39] David Simon, "*The Wire*'s final season and the story everyone missed," *The Huffington Post*, March 17, 2008, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-simon/the-wires-final-s\\_b\\_91926.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-simon/the-wires-final-s_b_91926.html)

[40] The writers of *The Wire* wanted to make a companion series to *The Wire* titled *The Hall* that would have focused more specifically on the political system. According to Simon, it would have acted as "an antidote to the *Father-Knows-Best* tonality of more popular political drama." Jim King, "Exclusive David Simon Q&A, *The Wire* on HBO", 16 August, 2006, <http://members.aol.com/TheWireHBO/exclusive-1.html>

[41] The "yes we can" mobilised to elect Obama might seem to have revitalised faith in alternative possibilities, but post-election demobilisation and lack of real change might come to be experienced as co-optation and defeat again. Barack Obama, incidentally, when asked about his favourite TV programme, declared that it was *The Wire* and that Omar was his favourite character.

[42] Simon and Burns are currently working on *Treme*, a series set in post-Katrina New Orleans.

[43] The latest HBO drama involving Simon and Burns is *Generation Kill*, a drama based on the experiences of an embedded reporter in Iraq in 2003.

[44] O'Rourke



[45] Matthew Iglesias, "David Simon and the Audacity of Despair," *The Atlantic*, January 2008,

[http://matthewyglesias.theatlantic.com/archives/2008/01/david\\_simon\\_and\\_the\\_audacity\\_o.php](http://matthewyglesias.theatlantic.com/archives/2008/01/david_simon_and_the_audacity_o.php)

[46] O'Rourke

[47] King

[48] Adam Kotsko, comment posted on March 23, 2008 on Joseph Kugelmass, "A Little Something You Can Touch: HBO's *The Wire* and the Politics of Visual Media," *The Valve: A Literary Organ*, March 20, 2008,

[http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/a\\_little\\_something\\_you\\_can\\_touch\\_hbos\\_wire\\_and\\_the\\_politics\\_of\\_visual\\_media/](http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/a_little_something_you_can_touch_hbos_wire_and_the_politics_of_visual_media/)

[49] Ken Tucker, Q&A with David Simon and Creative Team, special features on *The Wire: The Complete Third Season* (HBO Home Video/Warner Home Video, 2006).

[50] Mills

[51] David Simon, comment posted on Alan Sepinwall, January 27, 2007, "For *The Wire* Fans, What's Alan Watching?",

<http://sepinwall.blogspot.com/2007/01/for-wire-fans.html>

[52] Mills

[53] David Simon, comment posted on Matthew Iglesias

[54] David Simon, "Down To The Wire," *Baltimore Magazine*, 2008,

<http://www.baltimoremagazine.net/article.asp?t=1&m=1&c=32&s=466&ai=65969>

[55] David Simon, "The Game is Real", special features on *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season* (HBO Home Video/Warner Home Video, 2008)

## Bibliography of works cited

Burns, Ed. Audio commentary on episode 4.1 (Boys of Summer) on *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season* [DVD] HBO Video/Warner Home Video, 2008

Ducker, Eric. "The Left Behind: Inside *The Wire*'s World of Alienation and Asshole Gods," *Fader*, December 2006,

<http://www.thefader.com/articles/2006/12/08/listening-in-part-iv>

Gallagher, Aileen. "Andre Royo on Playing Bubbles on 'The Wire,' Snitching, and His Emmy Speech," *Vulture: New York Entertainment*, January 2008,

[http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/01/andre\\_royo\\_on\\_playing\\_bubbles.html](http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/01/andre_royo_on_playing_bubbles.html)

Hornby, Nick. "David Simon: Creator-Producer-Writer of HBO's *The Wire*," *The Believer*, August 2007,  
[http://www.believermag.com/  
issues/200708/?read=interview\\_simon](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview_simon)

Iglesias, Matthew. "David Simon and the Audacity of Despair," *The Atlantic*, January 2008 (including comment posted by David Simon, January 2, 2008),  
[http://matthewyglesias.theatlantic.com/  
archives/2008/01/david\\_simon\\_and\\_the\\_audacity\\_o.php](http://matthewyglesias.theatlantic.com/archives/2008/01/david_simon_and_the_audacity_o.php)

King, Jim. "Exclusive David Simon Q&A, *The Wire* on HBO", August 16, 2006,  
<http://members.aol.com/TheWireHBO/exclusive-1.html>

Kugelmass, Joseph. "A Little Something You Can Touch: HBO's *The Wire* and the Politics of Visual Media," *The Valve: A Literary Organ*, March 20, 2008, (comment posted by Adam Kotskas, March 23, 2008),  
[http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/  
article/a\\_little\\_something\\_you\\_can\\_touch  
hbos\\_wire\\_and\\_the\\_politics\\_of\\_visual\\_media/](http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/a_little_something_you_can_touch_hbos_wire_and_the_politics_of_visual_media/)

Lanahan, Laurence. "Secrets of the City: What *The Wire* reveals about urban journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January-February 2008,  
[http://www.cjr.org/cover\\_story/  
secrets\\_of\\_the\\_city.php?page=8](http://www.cjr.org/cover_story/secrets_of_the_city.php?page=8)

Lehane, Dennis. "In Retrospect: Dennis Lehane on *Clockers*," Critical Mass, February 23, 2008,  
[http://bookcriticscircle.blogspot.com/  
2008/02/in-retrospect-dennis-lehane-on-clockers.html](http://bookcriticscircle.blogspot.com/2008/02/in-retrospect-dennis-lehane-on-clockers.html)

Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *The Communist Manifesto*. (1848) Oxford: Oxford World's Classics 1998.

Mills, David. "Q&A: David Simon (pt. 1)," Undercover Black Man, January 22, 2007,  
[http://undercoverblackman.blogspot.com/  
2007/01/q-david-simon-pt-1.html](http://undercoverblackman.blogspot.com/2007/01/q-david-simon-pt-1.html)

O'Rourke, Meghan. "Behind *The Wire*: David Simon on where the show goes next," *Slate*, December 1, 2006,  
[http://www.slate.com/id/  
2154694/pagenum/all/#page\\_start](http://www.slate.com/id/2154694/pagenum/all/#page_start)

Scandalum Magnatum, "Balzac of Baltimore," Scandalum Magnatum, January 13, 2008,  
[http://scandalum.wordpress.com/  
2008/01/13/balzac-of-baltimore/](http://scandalum.wordpress.com/2008/01/13/balzac-of-baltimore/)

Sepinwall, Alan. "For *The Wire* Fans, What's Alan Watching?", (comment posted by David Simon, January 27, 2007),  
[http://sepinwall.blogspot.com/  
2007/01/for-wire-fans.html](http://sepinwall.blogspot.com/2007/01/for-wire-fans.html)

Simon, David. "David Simon on Homicide, Truth and Journalism," *Bay Weekly*, March 12-18, 1998,  
[http://www.bayweekly.com/year98/lead6\\_10.html](http://www.bayweekly.com/year98/lead6_10.html)

Simon, David. "Down To The Wire," *Baltimore Magazine*,  
<http://www.baltimoremagazine.net/article.asp?t=1&m=1&c=32&s=466&ai=65969>

Simon, David. Audio commentary on episode 1.1 (The Target) on *The Wire: The Complete First Season*. [DVD] HBO Video/Warner Home Video, 2005

Simon, David. "Introduction" in *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, Rafael Alvarez (ed), 2-34. New York: Pocket Books, 2004

Simon, David. Radio interview, *The Tubridy Show*, Ireland: RTE Radio 1, January 24, 2008,  
<http://www.rte.ie/radio1/thetubridyshow/1179937.html>

Simon, David. Special features, "The Game is Real" on *The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season* [DVD] HBO Home Video/Warner Home Video, 2008

Simon, David. "The Wire's final season and the story everyone missed," *The Huffington Post*, March 17, 2008,  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-simon/the-wires-final-s\\_b\\_91926.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-simon/the-wires-final-s_b_91926.html)

Simon, David and Burns, Edward. *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998

Talbot, Margaret. "Stealing Life: The crusader behind *The Wire*," *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2007,

- [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa\\_fact\\_talbot?printable=true](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot?printable=true)
- [http://www.avclub.com/content/interview/david\\_simon](http://www.avclub.com/content/interview/david_simon)

Tobias, Scott. "Interviews: David Simon", *The AV Club*, March 10, 2008,  
[http://www.avclub.com/content/interview/david\\_simon](http://www.avclub.com/content/interview/david_simon)

Tucker, Ken. Special features: "Q&A with David Simon and creative team" on *The Wire: The Complete Third Season* [DVD] HBO Home Video/Warner Home Video, 2006

Weisberg, Jacob. "The Wire on Fire: Analyzing the best show on television," *Slate*, September 13, 2006.  
<http://www.slate.com/id/2149566/>

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The companies are shown with establishing shots of their office buildings throughout the series.



*The Hills* uses clearly labeled shots of all of its locations to create a documentary feel ...



... and to establish destinations for fans of the program.

## “Don’t just watch it, live it” — technology, corporate partnerships and *The Hills*

by [Elizabeth Affuso](#)

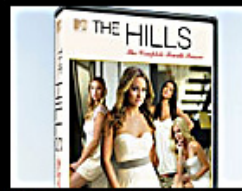
The MTV reality program *The Hills*, now in its fifth season, follows protagonist Lauren Conrad and her circle of friends around their day-to-day life to create a portrait of the “real” lives of young, attractive, and affluent women in Los Angeles.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] The plot lines of the show traffic in the familiar female melodrama of nighttime soaps, and while this drama is certainly entertaining, it functions as only one part of the aspirational lifestyle brand that is *The Hills*. Through a series of corporate partnerships with companies such as Bolthouse Productions, Epic Records, *Teen Vogue*, and by extension their parent corporations SBE Entertainment, Sony BMG, and Condé Nast respectively, the narrative of *The Hills* exists to promote these companies products, arguably solely to promote these products. While product placement is a mainstay of reality television, *The Hills* makes a point of differentiating itself from the dominant model by integrating it seamlessly into the narrative by positioning Lauren and her friends as employees of these companies, while simultaneously covering up the fact that their non-work entertainment is also provided by arms of these same entities. This method sets up the show as a comprehensive lifestyle brand for viewers and the show enables participation by labeling all of its locations onscreen, so viewers can easily tell where the women are eating, shopping, or partying, providing all the information necessary to replicate this experience if desired.

For viewers who want more or can’t visit the actual locations, *The Hills* also features a slew of web-based components, such as *The Hills: Live After the Show*, *IAmOnMTV.com* and most importantly *Virtual Hills* on MTV’s VMTV platform, sponsored by AT&T. With its “don’t just watch it, live it” slogan *Virtual Hills* presents a virtual version of *The Hills* locations and enables viewers to create an avatar, interact with other viewers, the cast itself, and purchase products while pretending to live as Lauren and her friends do. Using the *Virtual Hills* allows viewers to experience a world that is most likely out of their reach geographically, physically, and financially without ever leaving their own home. Now instead of encouraging you to buy a product that will give you a glimpse of the lifestyle, MTV is promoting buying the whole lifestyle, albeit in a digital way.





**Lessons In Love**  
Get the latest 'Hills' book, where the cast gives the straight scoop on dating and relationships!



**Season 4 DVD**  
Pre-order season 4 today for an exclusive bonus DVD, free shipping and early delivery!



**Download 'The Hills'**  
Get 'Drama In The Hills' and 'Off The Record' for free!



**Buy 'The Hills' Music**  
To download music from featured artists, head to Rhapsody!



**'The City'**  
Whitney's leaving 'The Hills' and heading to NYC. Check out the trailer and stay up-to-date with the blog.



**'Bromance'**  
Brody's searching for the perfect 'Bromance'! Watch the trailer, check out photos and more.

Web extras at [The Hills website](http://TheHills.com), which has a slew of multimedia and interactive components for viewers to use.



*The Hills* cast: Whitney, Lauren, Audrina, and Heidi

Through close analysis of the show and its virtual components, this paper will examine in detail the lifestyle brand that is *The Hills*, while considering questions of how new technology complicates theories of product placement, branding, reality television, and reality itself. By looking at how these elements work together to create an aspirational image for young women today this paper aims to analyze how the introduction of new technologies, like *Virtual Hills*, alters how these women are constructed as consumers of both products and images.

## *The Hills* as lifestyle brand

*The Hills* started airing on MTV in the summer of 2006 as a spin-off of MTV's reality series *Laguna Beach: The Real O.C.*, and is currently in its fifth season. *The Hills* is centered around a former character on *Laguna Beach*, Lauren Conrad, who has graduated from high school and left Orange County to live in Los Angeles and attend fashion school. Instead of the large cast of characters, both male and female featured on *Laguna Beach*, *The Hills* is centered on four young women, the aforementioned Lauren, her ex-best friend Heidi Montag, her roommate Audrina Patridge, and her coworker Whitney Port. Men are on the show primarily as love interests that come between the girls, but not as protagonists in their own right. The shows focus on female relationships prompted *New York Times* television critic Virginia Heffernan to write,

“*The Hills*...is more convincing than *Friends* and just about any other comedy about female relationships because — as anyone who has ever been a young woman knows — undying friendships die.”[2]



Heidi and Lauren before the death of their “undying” friendship.

This code of realism that Heffernan points to may be one of the major reasons for the shows huge success with young women. It is number one in its time period for woman 12-24 and the show routinely outperforms fictional counterparts, such as *Gossip Girl*, that are aiming for the same audience.[3]. Viewership is only growing with the *Hollywood Reporter* reporting 4.8 million viewers, the shows highest number ever for the Season 3 Premiere episode and 1.8 million streams of the episode in one day on mtv.com, up 29% from the previous season, reflecting



An outfit from the Marc by Marc Jacobs Fashion Show at the *Teen Vogue* Young Hollywood Party. This event was featured in a series of episodes in Season 3.



Area, a Los Angeles nightclub promoted by Brent Bolthouse and a frequent nightlife destination for *The Hills* cast.



Lauren narrates the opening of each episode to set the scene and establish the emotional tone of the show.

the importance of new media technologies in the success of the program.[4] While, the presumed core audience for teen shows has always been young woman, it needs to be noted that this demographic is also crucial for advertisers as young woman are thought to be the most avid consumers of products. This is especially important to think about with regard to the corporate interests that have attached themselves to this show and why this sort of partnership is so common in the teen television arena, not just on MTV, but on other networks as well, for example J. Crew's partnership with *Dawson's Creek* or the showcase of music featured at the end of an episode of *The O.C.*[5] By fully integrating the corporate partnerships into the show's narrative, viewers are not required to watch traditional advertisements, but rather absorb these products as part of the shows lifestyle branding, something that is increasingly important with the rise of viewership on DVRs, the internet, and DVD where traditional advertising is eliminated. Through these partnerships, *The Hills* creates a world that is less about traditional forms of product placement and more about constructing a lifestyle brand that shows viewers how to be young, beautiful, and successful through certain types of consumerism positioned around the brands that the show is partnered with.

While, both *The Hills* and *Laguna Beach* are ostensibly reality programs, they are seen as a new kind of reality, programs that are narrative based and are cast to appear like the fiction dramas that the shows are an outgrowth of. MTV even tries to distance itself from the term reality by calling these shows "unscripted series." Much has been made of whether these shows are in fact to some extent scripted, which seems to be true since in England the show features a disclaimer that parts may be constructed.[6] The documentary component makes the corporate partnerships on the show even stranger because instead of employing traditional kinds of reality TV product placement, such as the Levi's challenge on *Project Runway* or the Travelocity gnomes on *The Amazing Race*, *The Hills* use of product placement is complicated by the fact that so much of the girls allegedly "real" world is determined by the partnerships that it has, so that every location that they go to has been scouted and selected, every item of clothing they wear chosen, and their careers advanced to suit the needs of the brand that is being created.

This concept is made infinitely problematic by the fact that the show claims to be real, to be a documentary of what the lives of young women in Los Angeles are really like and not the construction that we assume to be an integral part of fictionalized television with its entirely built world. Formally this aesthetic of realism is enhanced by the lack of confessional that is so common on reality TV and by the shows decision to name and label every location. In place of a confessional the show gives Lauren a voiceover narration to transition from scene to scene, aligning her with the protagonists of fiction shows and allowing her to provide some introspective reflection on what is happening onscreen. Typically, the women deal with concerns common to other women their age, such as work, friend, and relationship problems and how to negotiate being on your own for the first time. This regular girl narrative is one that the show is aggressively maintaining even now that the cast is famous and constantly scrutinized by the tabloid press and the paparazzi.

## Role of corporate partnerships

Within this constructed world, the show features many elements of product placement that are consistent with that of other MTV programs, however in addition to the MTV connection, the show has had three main corporate partnerships — *Teen Vogue*, Bolthouse Productions, and Epic Records. These companies are positioned in the frame of the show as the girls places of employment, but half the shows screen time is given over to showcasing these companies daily activities and more importantly their output. *Teen Vogue* gets to





Lauren on the June/July 2006 cover of *Teen Vogue*.



Lauren and Whitney in their office at *Teen Vogue*.



Whitney supervising a *Teen Vogue* photo shoot after her promotion to full-time employee in Season 3.



Lauren getting the *Teen Vogue* look...



...followed by Whitney.

In the third season, Whitney and Lauren left *Teen Vogue* amid rumors that the magazine was upset about the girls partying and did not believe that it reflected the image they wanted to be associated with.[8] They have now started working at the fashion publicity company People's Revolution, which will allow for the show to continue to feature both established and up and coming fashion designers. The partnership with People's Revolution also allows for the show to shoot more segments in New York and raises the possibility for a spin-off series for Whitney to be set in the world of New York fashion, which would create many other corporate partnership possibilities for *The Hills* brand.[9]

Heidi's employer, Bolthouse Productions gets exposure for their clubs Area, Hyde, and S Bar because these venues are the nightlife destinations of choice for Lauren and her friends. The cast also frequently dines at Katsuya and the Abbey,



Heidi at Bolthouse Productions in a meeting with Brent Bolthouse.

which are both owned by SBE and also at the restaurants and clubs owned by the Dolce Group, such as Ketchup, Bella, Les Deux, and Geisha House among others. The Dolce Group is connected to Bolthouse through some of its investors, most specifically actor Danny Masterson who hosts a weekly radio show with Brent Bolthouse. In addition, both SBE-Bolthouse and Dolce have a major financial stake in the ongoing revival of Hollywood Boulevard, so these companies have a serious interest in making this area look like a destination. MTV furthered this re-imaging of Hollywood by setting its most recent season of *The Real World* in this area as well. Through the constant coverage of the cast both on the show and in the pages of tabloids these venues are continually publicized through this partnership and have become household names for millions of viewers who will most likely never frequent these hotspots and making Brent Bolthouse the most famous club promoter in Hollywood in the process.



A night out at Les Deux for Brody and Lauren.



Jen, Brody, and Lauren partying at Area.



Lauren and her ex-boyfriend Jason having a drink at Ketchup before a confrontation at the restaurant with Heidi and Spencer.

The third major corporate partnership is with Epic Records a subsidiary of Sony BMG, where Audrina works in the context of the show. Epic stands to gain the most financially from its corporate partnership with *The Hills* and its larger partnership with MTV more generally. The label released *The Hills: Original Soundtrack* in 2007 featuring the work of a number of musicians, such as Natasha Bedingfield and Augustana who are signed to Sony or its subsidiaries. The show also often features the girls going out on the town to the aforementioned clubs with Epic recording artists who happen to be visiting and sometimes sets them up as love interests for the women. *The Hills*, like many MTV programs, is wall-to-wall music and provides a venue for showcasing both known and unknown musical talent. In the third and fourth seasons of the show, the title and artist of each of the songs on the show get flashed onscreen in the style of a music video while they play, encouraging viewers to head over to MTV.com to find out more. This partnership with Sony BMG reflects changes that the music industry has had to make as a result of the digital revolution, as Rob Stringer CEO of Sony BMG UK puts it:

"We have to think that the principles of the record company in the old-fashioned sense are becoming dated now. Until five or six years ago the music industry was self-sufficient and there wasn't much interest in connecting the dots of the other areas of the media."

He is referring to the golden years when the CD was king. With piracy and illegal



downloading still rife and CD sales decreasingly valuable,

"we have to use any platform we can to get our music across to people. Circumstances have changed." [10]



Audrina at work at the Epic Records reception desk.



Audrina with Epic Recording artist Sean Kingston after a rehearsal for *Jimmy Kimmel Live*.



In the same episode, Sean Kingston played his song "Beautiful Girls," which has been featured on the show as background music in other episodes.

*The Hills* is conscious of these new trends and encourages multi-tasking while viewing, making it possible for viewers to be as focused on clicking over to the music as they are on watching the show. In fact the show seems to assume that its core base of viewers has easy access to the Internet while viewing. The tech savvy viewers that MTV is so aggressively courting are encouraged by MTV in advertising throughout the show to be utilizing the web-based components to enhance their viewing experience, often suggesting that fans who don't participate are having an incomplete viewing experience.

### ***vHills* and MTV's move into virtual lifestyle branding**

Corporate partnerships extend into the shows virtual world with sponsorship by AT&T and special events such as the M by Mariah Carey Ford Models Virtual Model Search.[11] Through its virtual components, the show allows viewers regardless of their location a chance to experience what life in the Los Angeles of



"Think you have what it takes to be a virtual supermodel?" An ad for the M by Mariah Carey Virtual Ford Model Search.



Heidi with her vHills avatar.

*The Hills* is really like. The *Virtual Hills* is a Second Life-esque virtual world where users create an avatar and are able to design their own clothes, dress the stars, and interact with a virtual version of *The Hills* world. The *vHills* platform also provides an important outlet for Lauren's other endeavors most notably her own fashion line. According to the press release for her line:

"Her fashion has inspired a generation of young viewers with its California chic look of flirty dresses and trendy tops usually complemented with a signature headband. Now legions of young women can emulate Lauren Conrad's fresh style in the real world and online. MTV Networks and Lauren Conrad — the star of MTV's popular series *The Hills* — today announce the first-ever celebrity-inspired digital fashion line to be introduced in the *Virtual Hills* virtual world. In addition, Lauren will develop a real-world fashion line that will be available in high-end boutiques, retail stores and online later this fall."<sup>[12]</sup>

This real and virtual line makes it possible to own all the components of the Lauren Conrad look or just pretend that you do if you don't have the financial ability to obtain the real thing, which most people don't as her line is priced at the higher end of the retail spectrum with prices starting at sixty dollars for a belt and going up to two hundred and twenty-five dollars for a dress.<sup>[13]</sup> *The Virtual Hills* also provides a forum for those viewers who are not depicted in the world of the show, so that while there are no non-white characters in the series, avatars can be created in all different races, allowing those who are visually and aurally excluded from the series to have a place in the world. This digital forum also addresses itself to the issues of class that are so excluded from the show — a departure from the fictional teen television programs that it is based on, which typically feature some sort of class conflict at their core.<sup>[14]</sup> With the advent of this new digital world, MTV seems to be suggesting that everyone can afford this lifestyle, and pretend to live it.

In addition, MTV has launched a new digital component this year, *IAmOnMTV.com*, which allows users to chat with the stars and features an interface similar to other social networking sites, such as thumbnail photos of friends and a chat function, thereby allowing viewers to pretend that they are connected socially to the girls through a vast virtual network. This connectivity allows viewers access to the stars, enhancing their real girl appeal, while simultaneously playing into the mythology of social networking sites, which allow users to believe that your virtual friends are the same as your real friends. Virtual MTV and the *vHills* provide viewers with an opportunity to pretend to be like the



Users of *vHills* interacting at the virtual Area nightclub.



Heidi and Lauren fighting over the sex tape rumor that Heidi allegedly started about Lauren. In this moment, Lauren says cryptically to Heidi, “you know what you did.” The details of this plot point were explained more clearly on the pages of *US Weekly* than in the narrative of the show.



Some of the show's appeal is in seeing Lauren's "private life," including eating take-out in front of the TV...

characters on the show, but ultimately this whole world is fake and it only allows viewers to pretend that they live in something that is “real” and that contains elements of human interaction.

## Denial of celebrity

This focus on stars being real can be seen as an outgrowth of a shift in discourse around celebrity that has occurred in the past couple of years with reality show stars becoming hugely famous and a promotion of the regular qualities of stars with columns like *US Weekly's* "Stars Are Just Like Us." *The Hills* is one example of a show that constructs its characters, as girls who are just like us, but better due to the physical and material access they have been given. While the cast is famous in the media at large, within the context of the show their fame is never acknowledged, positioning the women instead as slightly better-off regular girls with everyday problems.

MTV and the shows producers actively avoid discussing any of the celebrity-oriented elements of the girls lives on the show, such as drug use, sex tapes, or plastic surgery, in order to maintain their appeal as real people. These elements of the girls lives appear constantly in the tabloid media, but are only alluded to on the show. This positioning of the characters as normal has become increasingly hard to buy into as they have become famous in their own right and this fame ends up affecting the pleasure of the show for the viewer because it is now possible to know almost all of the important plot points of an episode in advance of its airing just by looking at the covers of gossip magazines. It has also become increasingly hard for the show to maintain this illusion of normality, with creator Adam DiVello telling *Entertainment Weekly* that they have had to create a deal with the paparazzi in order to keep them out of shots. In the same article executive producer Liz Gately links the appeal of the show to its lack of emphasis on fame saying,

“We give the people the access that they’re not getting in the tabloids. They’re getting their private life.”[15]

This idea that what viewers are really getting is the private lives of the girls is of course an illusion that is carefully constructed, just as the girls work lives are since we never see Lauren working on her clothing line or performing as the spokeswoman for Avon's Mark cosmetics line, jobs that are important parts of her income and image. In fact this year Lauren was named Number 97 on *Forbes* Celebrity Top 100 List suggesting that the Lauren Conrad brand is much bigger than the regular girl appeal that the show so aggressively constructs.[16] Heidi and Spencer the most notorious tabloid stars of the show also spend much of their time making promotional appearances at nightclubs and working on Heidi's music career, neither of which have any presence within the story line of the show.

Viewers of reality seem to be aware that what they're watching is not real and yet that doesn't seem to prevent the shows from being successful, and with *vHills*, MTV seems to be suggesting that the distinction between real and fake does not matter. In doing so, the show creates an image of reality that is a sort of enhanced version of the real, in much the same way that Lauren and her friends can be viewed. By adding the corporate partnership element, the show is also creating a forum where companies in some way invested financially or strategically in keeping a certain idea of cool alive can push their agenda. With the virtual component MTV allows viewers who would never be able to live the lifestyle the show and its partners are endorsing to pretend that they can, thereby keeping up the mythologies associated with youth, celebrity, Hollywood, and consumer culture.



---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

...or preparing for a date.



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

- 1.[\[return to page 1 of essay\]](#) An earlier version of this paper was presented at Console-ing Passions in Santa Barbara, CA, April 2008. Denise Mann, Suzanne Scott, and Kate Fortmueller gave valuable feedback over the course of revisions.
  2. Virginia Heffernan, "It's Lauren vs. Heidi in the Battle of the Ex-BFFs," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2007.
  3. *Gossip Girl's* Season 1 Finale, one of its highest rated episodes, posted 3 million viewers, see James Hibberd, "Gossip Takes Big Gain," *Hollywood Reporter*, May 21, 2008. Unlike MTV, The CW has taken aim at viewers who stream or download episodes even going so far as to pull episodes from its website and itunes in the second half of Season 1, for a report on this see: Andrew Wallenstein, "Gossip Stream Plugged," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 18-20, 2008.
  4. Kimberly Nordyke, "Hills Thrills with Record Viewership," *Hollywood Reporter*. March 27, 2008.
  5. For a discussion of this on *Dawson's Creek* see: Will Brooker, "Living on *Dawson's Creek*: Teen Viewers, Cultural Convergence, and Television Overflow," in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (London: Routledge, 2004), 569-580.
  6. In a recent interview with *Entertainment Weekly* Lauren and series creator Adam DiVello admitted to some re-shooting, with DiVello stating,

"If we lose something, or there's no audio and we need them to talk about something [again], we'll ask them to talk about it. Anyone that's making a reality television show that tells you they aren't doing [the same thing] is probably lying."
- In Tim Stack, "They Shoot. She Scores.," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 8, 2008. 31. The awkwardness that comes out of these re-shoots has led to much speculation about how much of the show is scripted, which MTV continues to deny.

7. Andrew Perry, *The Hills: City of Angels* (New York: MTV Books, 2006), 31.
8. "Exclusive: *Teen Vogue* on Lauren Conrad and Whitney Port: 'It was Time for Them to Move On'," *US Magazine*, February 8, 2008.
9. Christina Kinon, "*The Hills* Whitney Port lands job in New York," *New York Daily News*, August 27, 2008.
10. Ian Burrell, "It's More Than Rock'n'Roll," *The Independent*, March 6, 2006.
11. The M by Mariah Carey Ford Models Virtual Model Search is a contest that allows users to create an avatar and win a virtual modeling contest to be the new face of *vHills*.
12. "MTV Teams Up with Lauren Conrad to Produce First Ever Virtual and Real World Fashion Line," *P.R. Newswire*, March 6, 2007.
13. For a closer look at Lauren Conrad's entire line, go to <http://laurenconrad.seenon.com/>
14. Teen television shows typically feature a protagonist who provides an in text critique of the wealth that is depicted onscreen, examples of this include Brandon and Brenda Walsh on FOX's *Beverly Hills 90210*, Ryan on FOX's *The O.C.*, and Dan and Jenny Humphrey on The CW's *Gossip Girl*.
15. Tim Stack, "They Shoot. She Scores.," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 8, 2008. 31.
16. In its June 11, 2008 issue, *Forbes* estimated Lauren's income as 1.5 Million and on August 22, 2008 *In Touch Weekly* reported that Lauren's income for *The Hills* season 4 was \$75,000 per episode, with Spencer and Heidi making \$65,000 per episode each, Audrina \$35,000 per episode, and Whitney \$20,000 per episode. As of this writing, MTV has not confirmed the validity of these amounts.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Promotional photograph for Season 3



May 2008 Rolling Stone cover story



An example of the golden-hued lighting

## Postmodern marketing, Generation Y and the multiplatform viewing experience of MTV's *The Hills*

by [Amanda Klein](#)

In an April 20th *New Yorker* editorial, Nancy Franklin pondered the overwhelming success of MTV's *The Hills*, an “unscripted drama” that has become MTV's and basic cable's highest rated program.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] During the course of any given *Hills* episode very little happens: Lauren has lunch with Audrina, Heidi wonders where Lauren and Audrina are having lunch, and Whitney goes to work. Indeed, take away their money, their fabulous apartments and the constant presence of a television camera, and Lauren, Whitney, Audrina and Heidi — the show's “stars” — are not too different from the average twenty-something living in the United States. So what is the draw of this highly successful program? Franklin muses:

“For younger viewers — who are the intended audience for the series — it may be a soothing fantasy about coming of age, and give them the sense that even after they leave their parents' house they will still be the center of attention, the way these girls are.”(Franklin 137)

*The Hills*, she concludes “makes adulthood seem like a piece of cake.”

Like Franklin, I also see *The Hills*' appeal as strongly tied to the illusions it paints: about adulthood, about working and about what life might be like for a twenty-something living in Los Angeles. In this way the show is the ultimate example of “lifestyle television” or what Chuck Kleinhans has called “projective drama,” that is

“the dramatic presentation of a situation that the core audience views in anticipation that they will be in a similar situation sometime in the future.”(Kleinhans)

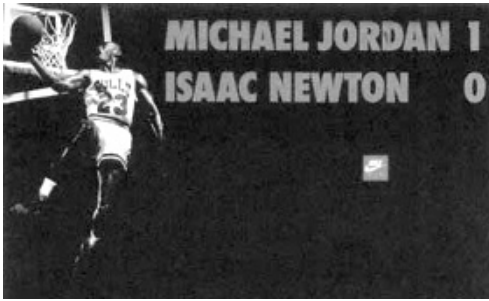
*The Hills* provides its viewers with a fantasy model of adulthood, in which work is easy, every night is “girls night out!” and everyone is filmed amidst the golden, romantic hues of a Southern California sunset. The girls never express concerns over paying their rents, finding employment in today's dreary economic climate, or even engaging in the world that (presumably) exists beyond the borders of Los Angeles' club circuit.[2] *Rolling Stone* writer Jason Gray admits:

“When the cheery theme song, Natasha Bedingfield's girly-power anthem ‘Unwritten,’ kicks in...you can sense the serotonin releasing inside your brain. *The Hills* is Wellbutrin on TV” (44).

## Multiplatform viewing experience

I also argue that *The Hills* has succeeded in part because it has found inventive

found in much of the series' imagery



A representative Nike ad featuring Michael Jordan, circa late 1980s



The Virtual Hills



Pepsi-themed clothing for avatars on the virtual Hills

and interactive ways to market itself to its target youth audience. But who are these viewers/consumers, and why has it been necessary to develop *new* marketing strategies in order to catch their attention? Generation Y has been described as “the most diverse generation in U.S. history” as well as the largest generation since the Baby Boomers (Rikleen). Members of Generation Y, alternately called the Millennial Generation, Echo Boomers, the Net Generation, the Tethered Generation, and the Everybody Gets a Trophy Generation, are generally defined as U.S. children born between 1979 and 1994 [3], who are both adept with and dependent on technology, including cell phones, wireless hand held devices, MP3 players, computers and the Internet.

As a result of this increased facility with information databases and modes of mass communication (theirs was the first generation to grow up using personal computers and later, the Internet), Generation Y’s “digital natives” have proved to be a marketing challenge (Yeaton 69). Market research reveals that the advertising campaigns based on image and slogan that worked so well with Baby Boomers and Generation X, such as Michael Jordan’s endorsement of Nikes, is ineffective with this new generation:

“...[Generation Y] respond to ads differently, and they prefer to encounter those ads in different places. The marketers that capture Gen Y’s attention do so by bringing their messages to the places these kids congregate, whether it’s the Internet, a snowboarding tournament, or cable TV” (Neuborne and Kerwin).

In order to capture this elusive demographic, *The Hills* relies on tabloid weeklies, entertainment news programs, Internet discussion boards and even the casts’ own side projects to promote the show. These platforms also serve as alternative venues for consuming the show’s content (i.e., the characters, their storylines and the goods they purchase and promote). For example, MTV recently conducted an online survey to determine how a viewers’ perception of a corporate sponsor, in this case, Pepsi, changed in relationship to the amount of “content” with which they came into contact. Those *Hills* fans who watched the program and then went online to participate in *The Hills* virtual world — spaces where Pepsi runs spots, banners and even offers Pepsi-themed clothing for avatars — were more likely to have a positive opinion of Pepsi and its products. The researchers discovered that digital platform extensions increase a viewer’s engagement with both a television show and its sponsors (McClellan).

The article interviews Henry Jenkins to explain this phenomenon of “engagement”:

"Engagement is the term we use to refer not to just regular TV viewership but to a more passion-driven and more socially driven mode of watching television and connecting pieces together...One could argue that the modern television viewer is a kind of hunter and gatherer who collects pieces of entertainment information that they care about across as many different platforms as possible." (qtd. in McClellan)

It is precisely this kind of viewer engagement that MTV is hoping to capitalize upon in its marketing of *The Hills*. Fans find content — not just within the narrow parameters of the thirty minute program — but online, on the newsstands and even when watching other, non-MTV programming, such as *Access Hollywood* or *Entertainment Tonight*.

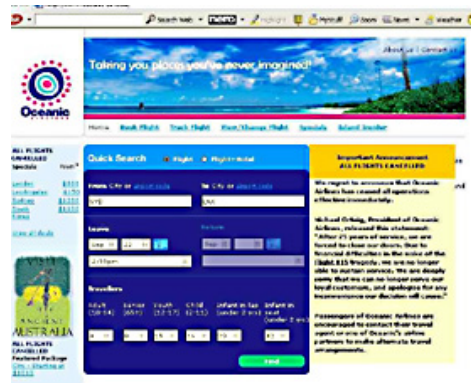
This kind of engagement does not, on the surface, appear to be unlike the elaborate lengths that certain television series with media savvy fan bases have gone to feed viewer demands for content during the long stretches between





The virtual Lauren Conrad and the "real" Lauren Conrad

seasons. *Lost*, to name one such program, launched intricate websites for the fictional Oceanic airlines, home of the doomed flight 815, and put up billboards for the airline in several cities in January of 2008. The show's producers even hired actors to attend the 2007 ComiCon in order to disrupt the *Lost* panel with outrageous conspiracy theories about the Hanso foundation. *The Hills*' creators, however, only need to release their cast members into the wilds of Hollywood's paparazzi-laden streets in order to generate and maintain viewer interest in the off seasons. The extradiegetic news stories and scandals circulating around *The Hills*' cast serves not just to remind viewers that the show is on the air. These stories become an integral component of the show's highly contrived plotlines, seamlessly integrating reality television, media scandal and fan adoration/outrage into one glossy, interactive package.



Website for the fake Oceanic airlines



A real world billboard for Oceanic airlines

This narrative practice assumes — or rather, demands — that the show's fans keep up with the cast members' off-camera antics. Of course, to speak of a true "off-camera" moment is impossible since *The Hills*' cast members live in front of an ever-present camera, transforming them into beautiful, blank slates onto which plotlines can be constructed. In *The Hills*, every facial expression, outfit choice, or dance club outing — whether filmed by MTV's cameras or those of the ever-present paparazzi — becomes fodder for future plotlines on *The Hills* and cover stories in the tabloids.

Several critics have made comparisons between *The Hills* and auteurs like Michelangelo Antonioni,[4] arguing that the series' reliance on stripped down dialogue, plotless narratives and focus on the anomie of the idle classes are quite similar to those of the lauded art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. This comparison is most accurate in terms of the show's lack of traditional plotlines. When European films were screened in U.S. art houses in the 1950s and 1960s, audiences were intrigued and annoyed by their violation of one of the most fundamental rules of Classical Hollywood cinema — namely the clear transmission of a cause and effect narrative driven by characters with defined goals. While the plotless, meandering narratives of films like *A bout de souffle* (1959, Jean-Luc Godard) and *L'Avventura* (1960, Michelangelo Antonioni) eventually made it acceptable for more mainstream directors to occasionally forgo cause and effect driven narratives, this tendency has yet to filter into U.S. television (or at least not successfully).[5] Thus, the plotlessness of *The Hills*, the fact that it is essentially "a show about nothing," only further underscores that its appeal is the complete accessibility of its characters.

Blogger Henry Wolfe accurately describes *The Hills* as:



Website for the fake Hanso foundation



Promotional photograph for MTV's *Newlyweds* (2003-2005), starring the now-divorced pop stars, Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey.

"...the narrative of our casually exhibitionist moment, of facebook, where the minutiae of the everyday becomes elevated because it's selected and exhibited and viewed by an audience; all those scenes where lauren talks at whitney or heidi talks at elodie or audrina talks at chiara, those one-sided dialogues, they're the televisual equivalent of facebook status updates ("heidi is feeling sad." "lauren doesn't know what to do anymore." "audrina is done with him.") (*sic*)."

Before social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, we never would have expected to know what our friends, or in many cases, complete strangers, were doing on an hourly basis. But because Facebook provides this luxury such information becomes both interesting and necessary. Lauren, Heidi and Audrina need only to exist — and to allow others to watch — to be entertaining. *The Hills* therefore is very much a show of today's cultural moment. In particular, it is a show keyed into the way that Generation Y experiences the world.

## Offscreen storylines



Jason Wahler's mug shot, circa March 2007

*The Hills*' cast courted the press from the start, but it was not until after Season Two finished airing that the series' unconventional approach to marketing became clear. In the interim between Season Two's finale in April of 2007 and the premiere of Season Three in August 2007, it was reported that the show's protagonist and narrator, Lauren Conrad, and her ex-boyfriend, Jason Wahler, known primarily for bouts of public drunkenness and racist rants,[6] had made a sex tape together. Although the story was quickly discredited, rumors spread that it was concocted by Lauren's former roommate (during Seasons One and Two), Heidi Montag, and her new boyfriend, Spencer Pratt. In the lazy summer weeks leading up to the Season Three premiere, when tabloid magazines make for excellent poolside reading, much was made of the acrimony between Heidi and Lauren. Both women allegedly refused to appear together in publicity photographs promoting the new season and asked that their storylines be filmed separately (Armstrong). Given this buzz, it is not surprising that the Season Three premiere of *The Hills*, entitled "You Know What You Did," was the most watched show, on both network television and cable, in the key demographic of 12 to 34 year olds. It was also the highest rated cable telecast of 2008 (*Hills* Premiere").

"You Know What You Did" opens with one of the series' signature "recap" conversations in which characters are expected to have an on camera conversation (which they have likely already had, off camera) about key plot points. Lauren enters the *Teen Vogue* offices, cooing over her co-worker, Whitney Port's, new promotion and the changes to their work space ("They've organized the dresses!"). The light tone of this conversation abruptly shifts as Whitney dutifully asks Lauren "How are you doing?" and slips into her customary role of "monologue catcher" a term Henry Wolfe has coined to describe this signature convention of the series. Despite the fact that this conversation is taking place for the benefit of the show's viewers (we can only assume that Whitney and Lauren discussed the sex tape scandal at some point during the summer), Lauren's recap is vague and confusing:





"How are you doing?"



"I didn't tell you what happened?"



"No."



"They were basically saying that me and Jason made inappropriate videotapes..."



"Who does that?"



"I just could never understand hating someone so much that you wanna do something like that to them..."



"Heard from Heidi lately?"



The "egg" — Lauren remains silent and shakes her head.



The scene immediately cuts to the opening credits.

Not only does Lauren avoid discussing the nature of the alleged tape's contents (she calls them "inappropriate videotapes"), she also refrains from conjecturing on the source of the rumor. Instead, Whitney asks, just a beat after before the show's opening credits begin, "Have you heard from Heidi lately?" followed by a blank shot of Lauren's face, otherwise known as an "egg."<sup>[7]</sup> Lacking a full discourse, viewers are asked to substitute their own, extradiegetic knowledge for what Lauren refuses to articulate<sup>[8]</sup>: that Heidi and Spencer are (allegedly)



When *Entertainment Weekly* shot the photographs for this cover story about *The Hills*' fall 2007 premier, Heidi and Lauren refused to be photographed together. The editors make a nod to Heidi's absence in the form of a tabloid magazine featuring her image, which is rolled up in Audrina's bag.

responsible for our heroine's pain. Within the diegesis of the show the sex tape scandal is framed as a rumor that circulated among Lauren's relatively small, onscreen circle of family and friends and on the Internet, but not as the media scandal that it was in "real life." [9].

Lauren does not explicitly accuse Heidi of starting the sex tape rumor. Instead, this recap conversation is used to facilitate a forward movement in the narrative, namely to preface the show down between Lauren and Heidi promised by the episode's tantalizing title. The confrontation occurs at one of the show's go to hang outs, Les Deux, when the girls attend a birthday party for a mutual friend. After Heidi attempts to reconnect with Lauren (she assumes that they have lost contact due to her decision to move in with Spencer), they begin to feud outside of the club. But as with the previous conversation, the confrontation between the two women is vague:

Lauren: Do you *know* why I'm mad at you?

Heidi: Why Lauren?

Lauren: You *know* why I'm mad at you.

Heidi: Why?

Lauren: You *know* what you did!

Heidi: What? What did I do?

Lauren: You *know* what you did!

Heidi: What did I do? What?

Lauren: Come on.

Heidi: What? You guys are crazy. What did I do? What did I do?

Lauren: You guys are sick people.

Heidi: What did we do?

Lauren: [incredulous] *What did you do?*

Heidi: Yeah.

Lauren: What did you do? You started a sick little rumor about me.

Heidi: I didn't start any rumor about you.

Lauren: Really? Nothing? Really?

Heidi: No. No.

Lauren: You're a sad, pathetic person.

[Lauren exits screen right]



"You *know* what you did!"



"What? What did I do?"



"You know what you did!"



"What did I do? What?"



"What did you? You started a sick



little rumor about me.”



“I didn’t start any rumor”



“You’re a sad, pathetic person.”

I cite this interaction at length because it is both highly tense and yet devoid of any useful information for the viewer, beyond the pleasures to be gained from watching two former friends scream at each other in a public space while donning designer dresses. Heidi feigns ignorance over Lauren’s accusation, but instead of serving the typical role of “monologue catcher” (that is, asking a question she already knows the answer to for the benefit of the audience), her repeated questioning of Lauren reveals almost nothing new to the audience. Those familiar with this scandal from the tabloids are frustrated by the vagueness of the accusations (why won’t Lauren use the word “sex tape”?). Similarly, those unfamiliar with the tabloid-fueled assumption that Heidi and her boyfriend started the sex tape rumors are baffled by Lauren’s confidence that her ex-roommate is the source.

But why *not* indulge the sex tape story? After all, it makes for a great storyline and would certainly help to accentuate and define the rift that had formed between Lauren and Heidi, the series’ dueling divas, in the interim between Season Two and Season Three. Without this extradiegetic knowledge it is unclear why Lauren and Heidi are no longer friends at the beginning of Season Three. [10] According to the show’s creator Avi Di Santo, the answer is simple:

“We want viewers to watch Lauren and the girls as the characters we know instead of in a show about *being* the stars of *The Hills*” (qtd. in Armstrong).

Di Santo’s distinction is key. Rather than allowing the tabloids and the cult of celebrity to dominate and eventually overtake the show — as it did with other successful MTV reality programs like *The Newlyweds* and *The Osbournes* — Di Santo wants the plotlines of his show to work in concert with the tabloids. The show’s producers do not wallow in the sex tape scandal or explicitly discuss Heidi or Spencer’s alleged role in creating it. To do so would be — to use Di Santo’s terms — transforming the series into a show about what it is like to be a star of *The Hills*. [11] To this end, cast members never mention the fact that they are being filmed, or that they are engaged in or affected by activities resulting from their involvement in an immensely popular television show.

But this strategy begs the question: Why *can’t* this show be about “what it’s like to be a star of *The Hills*”? Blogger and media studies scholar Michael Newman offers one possible explanation:



Heidi and Spencer's on-again/off-again romance was the March 17, 2008 *US Weekly* cover story.

“If Lauren or Heidi ever mentioned the existence of a program on television on which they regularly appear, the effect would be like a rupture in the space-time continuum. The first rule of *The Hills* is, you do not talk about *The Hills*.”

In other words, in order to maintain this illusion of a self-contained narrative world, of a show about regular (albeit fabulously wealthy and good-looking) twenty-somethings living in Los Angeles, the onscreen world can make little mention of the offscreen world. If the show did acknowledge the celebrity surrounding its characters — Lauren’s fashion line, Heidi’s singing “career,” Spencer’s love affair with *US Weekly* — then the show would likely collapse into itself, becoming just another venue for promoting the star texts of Lauren, Audrina, Heidi, Whitney and Spencer. *The Hills*, as a series, provides these individuals with their *raison d’être*. Acknowledging this within the text would likely diminish the appeal of both.



Features about Lauren are generally lifestyle-oriented and avoid addressing scandals in her personal life.



Lauren maintains careful control of her tabloid image as a fashion icon and teen role model.



In contrast, Heidi's tabloid image is constructed almost entirely of scandalous stories, such as her much discussed plastic surgery.

[Go to page 2](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Postmodern marketing



From Heidi's first music video, "Higher," filmed and directed by her boyfriend, Spencer Pratt.

Furthermore, it is unnecessary for *The Hills* cast to mention the MTV cameras and paparazzi lenses hovering just outside the borders of the television frame<sup>[12]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) because the producers know that their target audience is in fact reading the tabloids (or the Internet gossip sites or the show's discussion boards). The argument between Lauren and Heidi, in which the accusation proper ("You spread the rumor that I made a sex tape!") is absent, can be easily reconstructed by the "engaged" *Hills* viewer. In this way, tabloid stories, both in print and online, conveniently function as a seamless narrative bridge from season to season and even from episode to episode. Brian Graden, the president of entertainment at MTV describes the phenomenon this way:

"We have this six-month commercial for the show that doesn't give away the narrative in full. It's a kind of postmodern marketing. We're living in an age of TMZ and Perez Hilton — *The Hills* indulges that" (qtd. in Armstrong).



Perez Hilton interviewed Heidi and Spencer in early February 2008.

This so-called "postmodern" marketing practice became even more pronounced after the finale of Season Three when the camera-ready relationship between Heidi and Spencer became a regular feature in *US Weekly*, *Perez Hilton*, and other print and online gossip sources. For example, in the weeks leading up to the premiere of the second half of Season Three on March 26th, *US Weekly* printed several cover stories about the *Hills*' cast. During the week of March 17th, for example, the magazine featured an exclusive interview with Heidi and her allegedly ex-fiancé entitled "I was Betrayed by Spencer." Rather than a steamy tell-all with the young starlet, the article is a dissection of a trailer for the upcoming *Hills* premiere and the couple's reaction to it. Although it is not unusual for magazines to interview television stars about their upcoming projects, it is unusual for the stars to discuss themselves and their real lives as a television series. For example, when *US Weekly* asked Heidi how angry she was at Spencer, on a scale of one to ten, she replied,

"A seven or an eight. I mean, you see my reaction in the trailer" (qtd. in Reinstein 56)

Here, it is difficult for Heidi to describe her own emotions, separate from their documentation on television. Later in the interview Heidi is asked if she overreacted to Spencer's alleged cheating:

"We have different definitions of relationship boundaries. The viewers will have to see who they agree with" (qtd. in Reinstein 57).

Again, Heidi's responses are calibrated to and defined by their eventual broadcast to a television audience.

While Lauren is also frequently featured in the tabloids, these pieces are usually lifestyle-oriented: Lauren offers her fans diet and dating tips, or models seasonal fashions. However, Heidi and Spencer, perhaps in a bid to secure their roles on the show (since Lauren reportedly wanted both of them kicked off),





Staged photograph from the February 25th issue of *US Weekly*.



"I cried myself to sleep that first night after my video came out..."

have deftly used the media to their advantage by propagating several compelling narratives during the long weeks between seasons of *The Hills*: Heidi's attempts to become a pop singer, Heidi's reactions to the fan's reactions to her attempts to become a pop singer, Heidi's grotesque plastic surgery, Heidi's reactions to the fan's reactions to her grotesque plastic surgery, and of course, the couple's on again/off again relationship. For example, after the music video for Heidi's pop single, "Higher," was "leaked" online in January 2008 fans and critics were appropriately delighted by its awfulness. When the video was posted on the gossip site *PerezHilton.com* it received over 2,000 comments. The video was dissected endlessly by pop culture recap shows like *Best Week Ever* and *The Soup* and spawned countless parodies on YouTube. Heidi's initial response to this intensely negative fan feedback was accepting: "You really have to have a lot of passion and thought to write any comment. So thank you for any comment" she told Perez Hilton in an interview in early February. By the end of the month, however, Heidi had changed her story, perhaps correctly surmising that maturity does not generate tabloid headlines.

In a February 25th issue of *US Weekly*, complete with staged photographs of Heidi crying while clutching a CD (presumably hers) the aspiring pop star admitted,

"I cried myself to sleep that first night after my video came out...I just couldn't understand why people I didn't even know felt the need to be so cruel and hurtful toward me... I am just a 21-year-old from a small town in Colorado trying to follow her dreams" (qtd. in Guarente 73).

This cover story afforded the couple an opportunity not just to plug Heidi's singing career and the next season of *The Hills*, which would premiere in a month, but also the feuding couple's storyline on the show. When asked, "So are you two good now after calling off your engagement in December?" Heidi responded,

"Spencer and I are just starting over with our relationship, as you will see in the upcoming episodes of *The Hills*" (qtd. in Guarente 75).

As a result of their unabashed courting of the media, Heidi and Spencer have built an offscreen (or should I say an onscreen offscreen?) career out of being "Heidi and Spencer" from *The Hills*. Spencer directly addressed the couple's approach to self promotion in an *L.A. Times* interview:

"Janice Min at *Us Weekly* is like a family member to us...We love her. If my mom and her are e-mailing me at the same time, I'm like, 'Uh, Janice or my mom?'" (qtd. in Arthur).

Spencer and Heidi not only admit to the fakeness of *The Hills* in these interviews, they also admit to the fakeness of their offscreen lives — the part of their lives that we presume to be more "real" than that other less real (but purportedly real) world of *The Hills*. There is no attempt to uphold the illusion of some form of "reality" in the face of the audience. Spencer and, to a lesser extent, Heidi, freely admit that they are putting on a show. Spencer, who has



Heidi and Spencer regularly stage photographs with *US Weekly*. This one was for Easter.



Heidi and Spencer “celebrate” Independence Day 2008 with *US Weekly*’s photographers.

referred to himself and Heidi as a “brand” and as “improv TV personalities” (qtd. in Arthur) sees his existence as a never ending performance for whichever camera — that of *The Hills* crew, the paparazzi, or the interviewer — might be present at any given moment. Therefore it is not surprising that Spencer, just after he eloped with Heidi in November of 2008, described his wedding[12a] in this way:

“...when I saw Heidi walk down the aisle, it really hit me. I was like, This is *real*, she is so beautiful...It was like I was dreaming, to be honest. I’ll have to watch the video to have it sink in” (qtd. in O’Leary 50).

Like Heidi, Spencer conceives of his life in terms of its televisual documentation. Events that he has experienced become real to him only after he has consumed them as recorded images.

Spencer and Heidi’s approach to television stardom leads to a strong cognitive dissonance on the part of *The Hills* fan. If the viewer wishes to buy into the fantasy of the show — to see the diegetic narratives as coherent and real and the extradiegetic narratives as coherent and real (and even to believe that there is a distinction between the diegetic and the extradiegetic in *The Hills* world) — then s/he is straddled with an impossible task. After seeing images of Spencer embracing Heidi as she weeps over the poor reception of her “Higher” single on the pages of *US Weekly* in February, it is pointless to wonder whether they will get back together within the diegesis of the show (filmed months prior). In many ways then, Speidi’s tabloid antics act as the ultimate “spoiler” for the show — they revealed the conclusion to their own character arcs months before *The Hills*’ season finale. This practice serves as a marked contrast from other reality programs — like *Survivor* or *The Bachelor* — which demand that participants sign non-disclosure agreements ensuring that they will not reveal the final results of the competition in the interim between the end of filming and the airing of the show. Few people would want to watch *The Bachelor* if they knew from the beginning which lucky lady the bachelor ultimately chose. Yet no such muzzle is put on Heidi and Spencer — they are free to speak to the media whenever and wherever they like. Thus, *The Hills* has the peculiar effect of becoming more and more incoherent as the viewer becomes more “engaged” in the show and its alternative content platforms.

This multiplatform strategy again highlights the unique viewing experience of *The Hills*. Its media savvy audience is likely aware of the characters’ offscreen lives and yet they continue to tune in (in record numbers) to see what transpires onscreen each week. In fact, this drive to *see* these characters, rather than to see “what happens next,” is actively cultivated by MTV with its Remote Control website. This site describes itself as:

“... MTV’s official TV blog. We are the people you see on MTV, the producers of the shows and the fans. Exclusive photos, interviews, videos and recaps of all our favorite television shows are here for you in a matter of clicks.”

Here viewers can see the *Hills*’ cast members (and the casts of other MTV reality shows) in their various talk show interviews, media appearances and photo opportunities.

Viewers are not turning into *The Hills* merely for the 30 minute narrative; rather they tune in for “*The Hills* experience,” which includes reading about the cast in the tabloids, watching their “candid” interviews on talk shows ranging





Heidi and Spencer have been called “fameosexuals.”

from *The David Letterman Show* to *Tyra to Regis & Kelly*, reading their personal pages on MySpace,[13].discussing the show with fellow fans on MTV.com and other sites, listening to Heidi’s music and yes, even wearing the clothing designed by Lauren Conrad and Heidi Montag. Indeed, Lauren’s agent, Max Stubblefield, describes his client as a “global brand,” citing her endorsement deals with Mark cosmetics, AT&T, a book deal and a possible production company (Stack 30). *The Hills* series is simply one venue for consuming the Lauren Conrad brand.

## Generation Y and the workplace

Beyond this expansive multiplatform engagement, I believe that viewers are tuning into *The Hills* for another reason: It plays into the kind of worldview that has been cultivated in Generation Y since birth, namely that success is available to everyone, no matter their skill level or work ethic. Lauren, Whitney, Audrina and Heidi have limited educations and poorly articulated life goals, yet they are famous, wealthy and involved in exciting careers in fashion design, styling, music production/promotion and event planning. Growing up in the so-called “culture of praise,” in which every milestone was documented on film and every accomplishment, however small, was commemorated with a trophy, Generation Y must surely find some validation in the effortless success experienced by *The Hills*’ young, photogenic cast. Social critics argue that Generation Y was insulated from criticism and disappointment at early age by anxious Baby Boomer parents who wanted their children’s academic and extracurricular experiences to be collaborative rather than exclusionary, positive rather than ego-bruising:

“From their early days of shared rewards, constant media stimulation, and technology savvy, they have become a generation accustomed to quick answers, a constant flow of information and new ideas and immediate gratification” (Rikleen).

Indeed, a prevailing belief among today’s employers is that Generation Y, cultivated to be the ultimate “me generation,” have been imbued with a “false self-confidence” (Erickson). According to a CNN report, 87% percent of hiring managers and human resources professionals say Generation Y exhibits a sense of entitlement that older generations do not (Balderrama).

Although today’s youth were raised during the greatest period of wealth creation in modern history, they will have to struggle even more than their parents did to pay for college tuition, housing and health insurance. They face the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, reduced salaries and benefits, degree inflation and rising unemployment (Conlin 32). And yet there is a false confidence cultivated among Generation Y that wealth and fame are available to everyone who is willing to place himself or herself before the camera’s eager but indiscriminate lens. David Morrison, of the Philadelphia-based research firm Twentysomething Inc, explains the phenomenon in this way:

“People being themselves can be incredibly famous and get sponsorship deals, and they can become celebrities...It’s a completely new development in entertainment, and it’s having a crossover effect on attitudes and behavior” (qtd. in Jayson).



Heidi and Spencer disrupt the insularity of *The Hills*’ narrative with frequent “spoilers.”



Website's like MTV's Remote Control encourage multi-platform engagement.



Lauren uses MySpace to further shape her image and to “edit” information circulating about her in the tabloids.

One *Newsweek* reporter, Jennie Yabroff, dubbed Generation Y the “Look at Me Generation” because of their utter unselfconsciousness when faced with the probing camera of the documentary filmmaker and their willingness to post the most intimate details of their daily lives on blogs and social networking sites.

Indeed, psychology professor Jean Twenge, author of *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled — and More Miserable than Ever Before*, a study of generational differences based on data culled from 1.3 million Americans over the course of 14 years, found that the gap between expectation and reality is far greater for today's youth than it has been for previous generations. After years of being told that simply “believing in yourself” was all that was needed to succeed, Generation Y has, in general, unrealistic expectations about what it can achieve and what it will take to achieve it. While these hypotheses are likely exaggerated by the media, this paper argues that there is a link between the success of *The Hills* and its reliance on narratives which appear, on the surface, to mirror the fantasies of its target youth demographic. Namely, this generation fantasizes that an exciting, lucrative career in the field of one's choice is attained, not so much through hard work and perseverance (the American Dream), but through the vocalization of desire (the Millennial American Dream).

For example, during Season 3, after one year of working at Bolthouse Productions (a job she obtained without the benefit of a college degree or any real world experience), Heidi decided to apply for the newly available events director position. She is called into the office of her boss, Brent Bolthouse, and the following interview (recounted below in its entirety) takes place:



"Well, I feel like I've been here a long time and I've worked really hard and I'd definitely be up to the task if I'd be able to be considered."



"It's a lot bigger of a position."



"Yeah. I know."



"Well, interesting idea. Let me think about it."

According to the show's narrative Heidi is awarded the position over Elodie, a co-worker who has been at the company twice as long, based solely on this “interview.” Furthermore, the viewer is not privy to Bolthouse's decision-



making process — the next time the audience sees Heidi she is already seated at her desk in her new office. Here, *The Hills* effectively mystifies the entire process of interviewing and vetting a candidate for a new job. Heidi merely needed to vocalize her desire for the job in order to acquire it.

Similarly, when Whitney — who is depicted as being the most capable and hard-working of *The Hills* cast — decides that she would like to leave her current position at *Teen Vogue* in order to pursue “styling,” the move is effortless. Once again the audience is privy to Whitney’s interview — this time at the People’s Revolution, a “full service branding company” for designers. As in Heidi’s interview, the exchange between employer, Kelly Cutrone, and prospective employee, Whitney, is brief and vague:

Kelly: Why do you want to work on this side of [the fashion industry]?

Whitney: I think that the more opportunities I have and the more opportunities I put myself out there for, I should take advantage. I just think that working at *Vogue* was an unbelievable experience, I just wanted a job that, ummm, I could *do more*.

Kelly: What are your strengths? Why should I let you come work here?

Whitney: I could probably be very helpful in terms of whether, you know, its stylists who come in here and pulling for photo shoots or styling for look books, or styling for runway shows.



The Lauren Conrad collection, Spring 2008.



The Heidiwood line was sold in Anchor Blue stores in spring of 2008 but has since been dropped.



Heidi models her own line.

In an interview situation, Whitney, like Heidi, is only capable of articulating her desires for upward mobility. She wants to “do more,” to have better “opportunities” with her vaguely defined skill set. Whitney knows that she is capable of “styling” things, but she neither offers specifics nor is requested to be more specific in describing her abilities. Nevertheless, as soon as Whitney finishes speaking, Cutrone offers her the job. While it is likely that both Heidi and Whitney’s interviews were edited down for time and interest, they are presented to the viewer as complete events. In other words, there are no ellipses in the editing to indicate that story time has somehow exceeded screen time. This tactic creates the impression that both young women were awarded their new jobs based on the proclamation of their desires before a present camera.

In this way *The Hills* functions to promote aspirational lifestyle models to its viewers, creating a world in which minimal effort combined with strong consumer desires yields impressive and glamorous career rewards. In other television series which depict young, professional female protagonists, like the title characters in *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Ally McBeal* or even the female leads of *Sex and the City*,<sup>[14]</sup> winning a promotion is depicted as a challenge that must be surmounted by the eager, determined heroine. We value the protagonists’ achievements in the workplace because they labored to attain them. Furthermore, because they are women we understand that they are likely facing a gender bias that must be overcome. By contrast, in *The Hills* winning a promotion at work or obtaining a new job boils down to little more than the applicant’s enthusiasm for the position.<sup>[15]</sup>

Finally, in the world of *The Hills* work looks very similar partying: Heidi literally works at parties. Likewise, in the luminescent offices of *Teen Vogue*, Whitney and Lauren tap listlessly on their pristine Macintoshes, steam racks of candy-colored dresses, and have one-sided conversations about Lauren’s love life. This illusion of work — in which successfully picking up a pair of shoes from a top French design house earns the girls heaps of praise from their successful, hardworking boss, Lisa Love,<sup>[16]</sup> plays into Generation Y’s presumed fantasies about the workplace. For example, after Whitney begins her position at The People’s Revolution, she meets Lauren for a lunch date. In a reversal of *Hills*

conventions, it is Lauren who acts as “monologue catcher” while Whitney describes her new job for the benefit of *The Hills*’ audience:



"So the day I was there we were working on the Sass and Bide show..."



"So fun! Wait did you get to work backstage..."



"My job during the show was to, uh, call the models, like, Kelly would be like 'Okay next model out' and I'd be like 'Go go go!'"



"That's like my ideal job..."



"I know. I mean while I was doing it I was thinking 'Lauren would be loving this right now.'"



"Yeah."



Egg: Whitney appears uncomfortable.



Egg: Lauren clearly wants a job like Whitney's.



The scene immediately cuts to the opening credits.

Beyond learning that both Lauren's and Whitney's dream job can be described as telling models to “go go go” at a runway show, this scene also offers our heroine a new object of desire: a job at The People's Revolution. This teaser segment, which occurs just before the show's credit sequence, is ostensibly about Whitney and her new job, but it becomes, like everything else in the show,

about Lauren and her desires. The scene closes on an egg or rather a series of eggs: a medium close up of Whitney reveals that she is uncomfortable with Lauren's overt envy followed by a reverse shot of Lauren, offering one of her signature looks of dismay. Here again it is not necessary for Lauren to vocalize her desires (i.e., "I really want a job identical to your job, Whitney"). Rather, her wistful expression, which occurs just before the show's title song begins to play, indicates as much. In the world of *The Hills*, characters do not even need to engage in the work emoting; the audience does that work for them.

As viewers have learned from previous *Hills* viewing experiences, Lauren's ambitions will likely bear sweet fruit. Indeed, by the end of the episode Kelly Cutrone has offered Lauren a position with The People's Revolution. What is especially interesting about this particular plotline, however, is Lauren's desire and assumption that she should continue to work alongside her friend, Whitney. According to a research conducted by the consulting firm, Deloitte (to investigate why so many of their young employees left the firm), Generation Y workers will often choose a job based on whether or not they have a friend working there (Trunk), an employment expectation that would have appeared unnecessary or indulgent to previous generations. *The Hills* thus tweaks the already destructive American Dream even further by telling its youthful audience that hard work and determination are no longer a prerequisite for success in the workplace. Simply having the wherewithal to decide definitively what you would like to do with your career is enough. Furthermore, upon





Lauren's success is based upon her willingness to expose her personal traumas to a community of anonymous observers.

obtaining their dream jobs, *The Hills* cast members get to chat with their friends, attend glamorous parties and receive glowing praise for their minimal efforts.[16b]

Despite the fact that this generation will have to struggle even more than their parents did to pay for college tuition, housing and health insurance, *The Hills* offers young women misleading models of success and happiness based on unrealistic expectations of continuous validation and a willingness to expose one's personal traumas to a community of anonymous observers.[17] Furthermore, the show's replication and encouragement of the audience's complex relationship with the increasingly collapsed world of entertainment, news and product consumption offers a simulacrum for their current experiences of the world. Viewers are encouraged to engage with the program both on screen and within their daily lives as they surf the Internet, read a magazine, or go shopping for low-end party clothes. As a result, *The Hills* bridges the gap between advertising content and narrative content, effectively rendering these scripts interchangeable.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### Notes

I owe many thanks to Teresa Howell, my graduate research assistant in the Fall of 2007, for her help in gathering research for this article.

1. During the final weeks of Season 3, *The Hills* was also ranked as the top cable “time-shifted” show; *The Hills* was most frequently recorded by a digital video recorder, like TiVo (Gorman). [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

2. For a discussion of the links between the restaurants and clubs that appear in the series and MTV’s corporate partnerships, see Elizabeth Affuso’s article in JC 50 (2009).

3. These parameters shift depending on the text being consulted. Yabroff’s *Newsweek* article defined members of Generation Y as anyone born after 1982 and an article in *International Journal of Consumer Studies* dates the generation to those born between 1977 and 1994. Still others define this generation as anyone born after 1970.

4. See, for example, Gina Bellafante’s “Career Climbing, With Claws Bared” and Karina Logworth’s “5 Ways In Which *The Hills* is JUST LIKE An Antonioni Film.”

5. *Seinfeld* was famously described as a show about “nothing.” However, each episode did, in fact, center around defined (albeit silly) character goals, and plots were structured through cause and effect relationships.

6. See Ken Lee’s “Jail Time for Jason Wahler of *The Hills*” in *People* magazine.

7. Elana Levine defines the egg as

“the shot at the end of many daytime soap scenes in which an actor holds an expression for several beats until the scene fades out. The egg is an effective technique in soaps because viewers spend so much time with the characters that they learn to read into their faces...”

8. Levine has described this phenomenon as “meaning-without-meaning”:

“We get [for example] that Lauren is unsure about getting back together with Jason, her philandering ex-boyfriend, because the music and her smile-free face communicate it. But we understand this not so much because we understand who Lauren is but because we’ve seen enough music videos and soap-like scripted

drama to read the codes.”

9. While the story was not covered by mainstream news sources, it was a fixture on gossip sites like *Perez Hilton*, *US Magazine*, *The Superficial* and *Gawker* throughout the summer of 2007.

10. In the finale of Season Two, Heidi moved out of Lauren’s apartment to move in with Spencer. However, the women are still friends when the episode concludes.

11. In another interview with *Entertainment Weekly* just one year later Avi Di Santo recognizes that his creations are now out of his control and worries that soon there will be very little “reality” left for his cameras to film:

“We have a hard line because we really enjoy the world of *The Hills* we’ve created...[but] as they get more and more famous, their non-fame lives get smaller and smaller” (qtd. in Stack 31).

12. In 2008 MTV’s film crew had to strike up an alliance with lurking paparazzi in order to shoot footage for Season 4. Lauren Conrad explains “We’ll be filming at a restaurant and it will be us at a table, three cameras, and then a row of photographers behind the cameras” (qtd. in Stack 31). [[return to page 2](#)]

12a. In the weeks following Spencer and Heidi’s elopement, it was revealed that their Mexican wedding ceremony was merely “symbolic” since the couple never went through the procedures necessary to make their Mexican wedding ceremony legally binding. As a result, the couple was able to further milk this storyline on *The Hills* as audiences wondered whether they would go through with a legal marriage ceremony in California.

13. For example, after *Us Weekly* published a cover story on Lauren Conrad, with the headline “How I Was Stabbed in the Back” (one of the few salacious stories about Lauren to appear in the media), she fired back with a post on her MySpace page explaining her side of the story:

“Hey! I just wanted to take a moment to clear something up. I recently did an interview to talk about the show coming back on and what everyone had to look forward to. Unfortunately it was turned into yet another ‘poor me’ story. The article itself is a nice one but it follows headlines that, in no way, represent my words or feelings. I do not feel betrayed by Audrina or Brody. I love them both and said nothing to contradict this. I understand that headlines sell magazines, but I value my friendships above magazine sales any day.”

14. Jason Gay also notes the similarities between Lauren and television’s other “career women”: “Like with Mary Tyler Moore or Carrie Bradshaw, viewers relate to Lauren because she’s a searcher — for true love, the perfect job and friends that never let her down.” (46).

15. Indeed, in Episode 4.18 “Dream Boy, Dream Job” Whitney is informed by

her new boss, Kelly Cutrone, that she will be interviewing for a job with designer Diane von Furstenberg in New York City. Once again, she is awarded this position despite a lackluster interview. This particular job opportunity is arranged so that Whitney can star in her own *Hills* spin off, *The City*.

16. See Episode 3.19 “Paris Changes Everything.”

16b. This approach to the depiction of the work place shifts somewhat in the fifth and final season of *The Hills*, which premiered in April 2009. In the episode entitled “Crazy in Love,” Lauren arranges for Stephanie Pratt to have an internship at The People’s Revolution. Stephanie, however, proves to be an inept intern, incurring the wrath of boss Kelly Cutrone on several occasions. After Stephanie makes a mistake counting inventory, Lauren starts to explain the importance of professionalism. But Stephanie begins doodling mid-lecture:

“I think maybe, when you come here, its important just to kind of...focus. I think it’s just balancing that...Are you listening to me? Why are you, like, doodling? Stop.”

I believe that the show is increasingly invested in displaying Lauren’s professionalism since, once *The Hills* is over, she will be expanding her “brand” to writing young adult books and producing, among other ventures.

17. When Lauren was featured on the August 8, 2008 cover of *Entertainment Weekly* she admitted “Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I think I’m being filmed” (qtd. in Stack 31).

## Works cited

Armstrong, Jennifer. “‘The Hills’ Are Alive.” *EW.com* 9 Aug. 2007. 23 May 2008  
<<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20050690,00.html>>.

Arthur, Kate. “Heidi Montag and Spencer Pratt: ‘We’re Entertainers’.” *Los Angeles Times* 11 May 2008. 23 May 2008  
<<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/tv/la-ca-hills11-2008may11,0,2852624.story>>.

Balderrama, Anthony. “Generation Y: Too Demanding at Work?” *CNN.com* 26 Dec. 2007. 23 May 2008  
<<http://www.cnn.com/2007/LIVING/worklife/12/26/cb.generation/>>.

Bellafante, Gina. “Career Climbing, With Claws Bared.” Rev. of *The Hills*. *The New York Times* 24 Mar. 2008. 23 May 2008  
<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A00E3D8123BF937A15750CoA96E9C8B63&sec=&spon=&&scp=2&sq=career%20climbing,%20with%20claws%20bared&st=cse>>.

Conlin, Michelle. “Youth Quake; They’re Called Millenials—and They’re Fed Up.” *Business Week* 21 Jan 2008: 32.

Erickson, Tammy. "Gen Y: Really All That Narcissistic?" *Business Week Online* 3 Mar. 2008. 23 May 2008  
<[http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/feb2008/ca20080228\\_450510.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/feb2008/ca20080228_450510.htm)>.

Franklin, Nancy. "Frenemy Territory: The hills are alive with the sound of girl talk." *The New Yorker* 21 Apr. 2008: 136-137.

Gay, Jason. "Are They for Real?: Why MTV's 'The Hills' is the Show you Love to Hate—or Hate to Love." *Rolling Stone* 15 May 2008: 40-42, 44, 46, 48.

Gorman, Bill. "The Hills Tops Cable TV Time-Shifting with 35.5% Increase." *TV by the Numbers* 28 May 2008. 30 May 2008  
<<http://tvbythenumbers.com/2008/05/28/the-hills-tops-cable-tv-time-shifting-with-355-increase/3926>>.

Guarente, Gabe. "I Cried Myself to Sleep." *US Weekly* 25 Feb. 2008: 72-75.

"Hills Premiere Breaks Ratings Record." *US Magazine.com* 26 Mar. 2008. 23 May 2008  
<[http://www.usmagazine.com/hills\\_premiere\\_breaks\\_ratings\\_records](http://www.usmagazine.com/hills_premiere_breaks_ratings_records)>.

Jayson, Sharon. "Gen Y's Goal?: Wealth and Fame." *USA Today.com* 10 Jan 2007. 23 May 2008  
<[http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-01-09-gen-y-cover\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-01-09-gen-y-cover_x.htm)>.

Kleinhans, Chuck. "Webisodic Mock Vlogs: HoShows as Commercial Entertainment New Media." *Jump Cut* 50 (2008). 15 Jul. 2008  
<<http://www.ejumpcut.org>>.

Lee, Ken. "Jail Time for Jason Wahler of *The Hills*." *People.com* 6 Mar. 2007. 15 Jul. 2008  
<<http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20014216,00.html>>.

Levine, Elana. "The New Soaps? *Laguna Beach*, *The Hills*, and the Gendered Politics of Reality 'Drama'." *FlowTV* 4.10 (2006). 23 May 2008  
<<http://flowtv.org/?p=19>>.

Logworth, Karina. "5 Ways In Which *The Hills* is JUST LIKE An Antonioni Film." *Spout Blog*. 25 Mar. 2008. 23 May 2008  
<<http://blog.spout.com/2008/03/25/5-ways-in-which-the-hills-is-just-like-an-antonioni-film/>>.

McClellan, Steve. "'The Hills' is Alive: MTV research links cross-platform marketing to brand affinity among Web users." *AdWeek* 5 May 2008. 30 May 2008  
<[http://www.adweek.com/aw/content\\_display/news/agency/e3i26f1bfd408799a204314aa22cf15c8a5?pn=1](http://www.adweek.com/aw/content_display/news/agency/e3i26f1bfd408799a204314aa22cf15c8a5?pn=1)>.



Montag, Heidi and Spencer Pratt. "Heidi Montag Speaks." Interview. *Perez Hilton.com*. 6 Feb.2008. 23 May 2008  
<<http://perezhilton.com/2008-02-06-heidi-montag-speaks>>.

*MTV Remote Control*. 2007. MTV. 24 Jul. 2008  
<<http://remotecontrol.mtv.com>>.

Neuborne, Ellen and Kathleen Kerwin. "Generation Y." *Business Week Online* 15 Feb. 1999. 23 May 2008  
<[http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99\\_07/b3616001.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99_07/b3616001.htm)>.

Newman, Michael. "The Hills is Too Real." *Zigzagger* 13 May 2008. 24 May 2008 <<http://zigzagger.blogspot.com/2008/05/hills-is-too-real.html>>.

O' Leary, Kevin. "Heidi & Spencer: Yes, We Eloped!" *US Weekly* 8 Dec 2008: 46-53.

Reinstein, Mara. "How Spencer Betrayed Me." *US Weekly* 17 Mar. 2008: 54-59.

Rikleen, Lauren Stiller. "How the "Millennial" Generation Works." *The Young Lawyer* 1-2 (2008). 14 Jul. 2008  
<<http://www.abanet.org/yld/tyl/mayo8/mayo8.pdf>>

Stack, Tim. "They Shoot. She Scores." *Entertainment Weekly*. 8 Aug 2008: 26-31.

Trunk, Penelope. "What Gen Y Really Wants." *Time.com* 5 Jul 2007. 15 July 2008  
<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1640395,00.html>>.

Twenge, Jean. *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled — and More Miserable than Ever Before*. Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2008.

Wolfe, Henry. "The Hills Season 3 Finale." *songs about buildings and food* 11 Dec. 2007. 23 May 2008  
<<http://songsaboutbuildingsandfood.wordpress.com/2007/12/11/the-hills-season-3-finale/>>.

-----"The Hills Season 3, Episode 20, "Back to L.A." *songs about buildings and food* 2 Apr. 2008. 23 Jul. 2008  
<<http://songsaboutbuildingsandfood.wordpress.com/2008/04/02/the-hills-season-3-episode-20-back-to-la/>>.

Yabroff, Jennie. "Here's Looking at You, Kids." *Newsweek* 24 Mar. 2008. 3 Jun. 2008.  
<<http://www.newsweek.com/id/123484>>.

Yeaton, Kathryn. "Recruiting and Managing the 'Why?' Generation: Generation Y." *The CPA Journal* 78.4 (2008): 69

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*Mad Men's* title sequence is animated in a style reminiscent of Saul Bass's design for the film, *Anatomy of a Murder*, the graphic for which was a splayed male body suggesting a crime scene outline. As Debord described the world of the spectacle, advertising is "the commodity contemplating itself in a world of its own making."



Cinematographer Phil Abraham noted about the period's designs, "the overhead grid of lights was a strong graphic element in all the office spaces. In one design we loved, the whole ceiling was a lightbox."

## The past isn't what it used to be: the troubled homes of *Mad Men*

by [Mark Taylor](#)

"Nostalgia. It's delicate, but potent... In Greek, nostalgia literally means the pain from an old wound. It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone."

— Don Draper, *Mad Men*, 1.13 (*The Wheel*)

Nostalgia is defined as "a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for the return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition." The term is often related to homesickness. AMC's series, *Mad Men*,<sup>[1]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) set in 1960s New York, deals with this yearning. Both in and outside the narrative, the idea of "home," or more specifically a home that has been lost or is in some way unattainable, is central to the series.

Beginning in 1960 and set in the fictional ad agency, Sterling Cooper, *Mad Men* follows the exploits of the men and women of New York's Madison Avenue, the center of the advertising industry.



Sterling Cooper's boardroom



Creative Director Don Draper's office

A stylized portrait of the highly competitive world of mid-20th century advertising, *Man Men* is a sleek, Kodachrome pleasure craft depicting the social and sexual mores of an era at the dawn of various cultural revolutions. Everyone smokes and drinks with impunity, tossing off casually racist and sexist remarks, which both horrify and titillate our post-PC sensibility. The program's modern design is full of lines, like trajectories, that create a world in motion, generating a woozy, almost drunken hallucination of a bygone era that occasionally veers into vertigo. This feeling of disorientation marks every character and every social relationship in the series.

All of *Mad Men's* central characters have troubled home lives and uneasy relationships to traditional marriage, expressed through the repressed housewife, the philandering husband, the mistress/secretary, the single mother, the closeted homosexual and the inter-racial couple. Consequently, many of *Mad Men's* characters seem more "at home" in the workplace than they do anywhere else, even though the constant jockeying for position and subtle shifts



The program's modern design is full of lines, like trajectories, that create a world in motion, generating a woozy, almost drunken hallucination of a bygone era that occasionally veers into vertigo.

in traditional sex roles have created a destabilized environment where belonging is an ever-present concern.

For a workplace drama, the meaning of home is complicated. According to Karl Marx, the worker

"is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home."[2]

This is part of Marx's definition of alienation, that the worker is separated from himself because his labor is not his own. Over one hundred years after Marx, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord describes this alienation as permeating all of modern existence. Being has been transformed into having and having into appearing, so that the modern world is dominated by appearances. The individual constructs his identity based on image — clothes make the man — and, since he can never fully live up to that image, he becomes alienated in all aspects of his existence:

"The individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. [He] feels at home nowhere..."[3]

Home is an image that we carry with us, like a snapshot, of people and of places that are always changing. We may have a fixed image, but its contents are already a part of the past. Advertising builds on our personal needs and preoccupies itself with generating images of the perfect life, the perfect family and the perfect home. Basing a dramatic series on the creators of such fictions, *Mad Men* reveals the artifice behind these constructions. Additionally, by playing against notions about the 1960s as modern, assured, hopeful and less complicated, *Mad Men* forces us to confront our own homesickness, which is the idea that we can return to a simpler time or that such a time ever existed. The ad men in the series know how to manipulate reality. It is their manipulation that will formulate their future, which is our present.



Before Peggy Olsen begins her first day as Don Draper's secretary, she is sexually harassed in the elevator by a group of ad men.



Named partner Roger Sterling and Office Manager Joan Holloway. Their affair and its aftermath reveal much about the sexual politics of the era.

*Mad Men* draws on a tradition that includes the 1947 film *The Hucksters*, which used the story of a radio ad man, back from WWII and in hot pursuit of a job selling soap, to explore many of the less attractive features of the era's competitive yet conformist culture. In pop sociology from the fifties, Vance Packard's best-selling book *The Hidden Persuaders*, published in 1957, scrutinized advertisers' use of motivational research and psychological studies to manipulate the public. The book critiqued the employment of these techniques in political campaigns. In a slightly broader vein, the novel and 1956 film-version of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* examined the New York executive culture of the post-WWII era. The title became a part of the U.S. vernacular, symbolizing the conformity and questionable integrity of the U.S. businessman. A number of public intellectuals, such as David Reisman (*The Lonely Crowd*), wrote well-known books about the change in U.S. corporate culture in the post-war era. Much of this was the subject of standard Sunday newspaper supplement discourse.

The series begins with self-definition, informing us that

"'Mad Men' is a term coined in the late 1950s to describe the





*Mad Men* references many classic ad campaigns, such as the Volkswagen "Lemon" ad in the magazine here.

advertising executives of Madison Avenue. They coined it."[4]

The term as used here is both shorthand and strategy. If these men are "mad," they are liable to do anything, which is a power move, a way to claim as much freedom as possible. This madness is both the intangible source of creativity and a tangible excuse for bad behavior. As image workers, they are both fashioning society and apart from it, making a home, but too knowing to live there comfortably.

For *Mad Men*, the series, the additional meaning of "mad" also applies. These men (and women) are angry and the source of that anger is what fuels the show. A nagging discontent troubles the edges of the perfectly appointed modernist sets. Anxiety, revealed through visual style, is the one detail that is most important in *Mad Men*, a program slavishly devoted to detail. From skinny grey suit to torpedo bra, the hairstyles, dress, furniture, buildings, cars and homes of the early sixties are meticulously rendered, as is the anxiety. This apprehension stems from an uncertainty about the social structure, not only about where one belongs inside that structure but also about how one behaves within it.

In the world of *Mad Men*, image and belonging are connected. No character embodies this point more fully than Don Draper, Sterling Cooper's Creative Director. Draper is the dapper "alpha male" in the office, the one to whom the others look for guidance and the one of whom they are most afraid. He is a hard-drinking workaholic, whose beautiful wife and two children are safely tucked away in Westchester, an upper-middle class suburb of New York. Draper is literally a "self-made" man. It is revealed in the first season that he has stolen the identity of a fellow soldier who was killed in the Korean War. He is *Mad Men*'s central mystery. Even his name implies hiding or shrouding.

Don Draper as played by Joe Hamm is beautiful, but dangerous like all things of beauty: it is so easy to get lost in them. The perfect 007 hero, he is a cipher, fully self-contained. Draper is an unreconstructed man, a collector of women and trophies. Women want to ride and tame him; men want to ride and harness him. He has no needs that he cannot fulfill for himself. He is full already, of secrets, of mystery.

All of the show's other characters are equally perplexed as they try to anticipate his needs and understand his behavior. But he is not really there; he is just a projection, or the outline of a man, like the one in the show's title sequence.[5] Perhaps it is just another projection to see Draper's duplicity as stemming from some basic weakness that he is trying to cover up, symbolized by the past he has abandoned, the home he has escaped. Everything in his life is a lie,

"and only as liars do [he-men] truly become sadists, agents of repression."[6]

Draper's relationship to home is complicated by his secret past. After winning an advertising award in season 1, episode 5 (5G), Draper's picture appears in a trade magazine, which inspires a visit by his younger brother, Adam (Jay Paulson), now a janitor living in a Manhattan residential hotel. This visit functions as a catalyst for the script to uncover Draper's previous life as Dick Whitman, an orphan raised by his stepmother and her second husband. When Adam and Draper meet for lunch, Adam recalls seeing Dick/Draper on the train delivering his own dead body to the Whitman family. Knowing that Dick was still alive, Adam has lived the rest of his life with the hope that he and his brother would be reunited. When Don rejects his familial advances and offers him \$5,000 to leave Manhattan and never make contact again, Adam breaks down. Draper is his home. Eventually Adam's loneliness overtakes him and he



Creative Director Don Draper



Draper's wife, Betty.



Draper as a man full of secrets, of mystery.

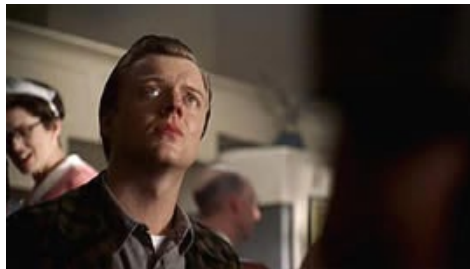
hangs himself.



Dick Whitman wakes up after an accident provides him with the opportunity to assume the identity of Don Draper, his commanding officer.



Adam, Dick's younger brother sees him on the train, delivering his own dead body to the Whitman family.



Adam Whitman meets Draper at a diner. When Don rejects Adam's advances and offers him ...

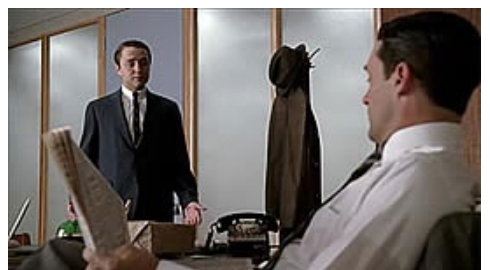


... \$5,000 to leave Manhattan and never make contact again, Adam breaks down. Draper is his home.

The visit destabilizes Draper's façade. His previous life begins to intrude on his current one. In season 1, episode 6, (*Babylon*), Draper takes a fall delivering a Mother's Day breakfast to his wife, Betty (January Jones). He lands on his back at the foot of the staircase, and he is briefly transported into the past, which invades his home. Young Dick Whitman has also taken a fall and is scolded by his stepmother's husband. In a further plot development related to his brother's reappearance in his life, before committing suicide, Adam sends a box of old photographs to Don/Dick at Sterling Cooper. Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser), an ambitious younger accounts executive, intercepts the box and uses the information in a failed attempt to blackmail his boss Draper into giving him a promotion.



Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser), an ambitious accounts executive, intercepts a box filled with mementos from Adam.



Pete uses his knowledge of Draper's assumed identity in a failed attempt to blackmail Draper into giving him a promotion.

Draper's assumed identity has provided him access to a world filled with all the trappings of success: a good job, a beautiful suburban home, two children and a lovely wife. His identity becomes multiple: the successful businessman, the loving husband and father, the playboy, and the war hero, but he inhabits none



Draper as loving husband and father.



Draper begs Rachel Menken, one of his mistresses, to give up everything and run away with him. She realizes that he doesn't really want to run away with *her*, he just wants to run away, and she rejects him.



Betty Draper suspects her husband is having an affair.

of them. In multiple instances throughout the first two seasons, Draper seeks escape; he doesn't belong. Despite the advantages of class, Don Draper is as big a trap as was Dick Whitman.

In season 1, episode 12 (*Nixon Vs. Kennedy*), Draper begs one of his mistresses to give up everything and run away with him. She realizes that he doesn't really want to run away with *her*, he just wants to run away, and she rejects him. In season 2, episode 11 (*The Jet Set*), while on a business trip to California, Don accepts an advance from a wealthy young heiress. He spends the final few episodes of the season deciding whether or not he will run off with a group of jet-set Europeans who like and will support him because he's "beautiful and doesn't talk too much." In these instances, as Draper's façade cracks, a viewer can feel a sense of suffocation and occasionally desperation. Even though Draper is married, he insists on playing the field; even though he is named partner at Sterling Cooper, he resists a binding contract with the firm. He is always leaving the door open, and in so doing, never committing to his life.



Draper falls in with a group of jet set Europeans who like and will support him because he's "beautiful and doesn't talk too much."



In California Draper's escape fantasies visualized.

Just as he abandoned his former identity when a new one presented itself, it is possible that Draper may, at any moment, desert his family or his career should a more advantageous opportunity arise. He is an image and images can be unreliable; this is his "madness." As Foucault writes,

"It would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination, which, by definition, are means of escape." [7]

Draper's unpredictability is his power, and he wields it most cruelly against members of the upper class, his wife included. Draper dominates Betty; competes with Roger Sterling (John Slattery), the agency's junior partner who inherited the position from his father; and stifles Pete Campbell, the account executive who was hired because of his wealthy family's connections. Draper is antagonistic toward each because of their sense of entitlement.

But their privilege doesn't translate into stability. Betty's marriage has alienated her from her father who dislikes Don because he can't "trust a man who doesn't have any family." Roger's wife and daughter have turned against him. Pete's father belittles his career and refuses to support his new marriage.

In season 1, episode 4 (*New Amsterdam*), Pete Campbell's new wife manipulates him into buying a co-op apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side, using his family name to smooth the way with the co-op board. Pete's mother is a Dykeman, the family that once owned most of Manhattan north of 125th Street. Pete is alienated from his wealthy family, an outcast, yet his family name is his entrée to both his wife, who has married the name as much as the man, and to the co-op. Since he is rejected by his family, abused by his father and ignored by his mother, the home that is purchased and (unknown to him)





Betty and Don have a violent argument.

the job that is saved with their name are not his own. He is doubly alienated by the privileges secured with his family name. Later, in season 2, episode 2 (*Flight 1*), Campbell discovers that his father has spent all the family money and become insolvent; even his privilege was an illusion.



Don Draper confronts Pete Campbell about Campbell's insubordination.



Campbell nearly loses his job at Sterling Cooper.



Campbell is alienated from his wealthy family, an outcast. Yet his family name offers entrée to both his wife, who's married the name as much as the man, and to a co-op apartment his wife convinces him to buy.



Campbell asks his parents to help with the down payment and they refuse. Campbell's wife Trudy uses his family name to smooth the way with the co-op board. Since Campbell is ...



... rejected by his family, abused by his father and ignored by his mother, the home that is purchased and (unknown to him) the job that is saved with their name are not his own.



Campbell discovers that his father has spent all the family money and become insolvent. Thus he learns that even his privilege has been an illusion.

In contrast in terms of class and career trajectory, Draper promotes his secretary, Peggy Olsen, a working class Brooklyn girl, to Copywriter and champions her development inside the office. When Peggy is promoted, not only is she forced to create the role (no woman has ever made such a move) and assert her place within the social structure of the office, but the structure itself shifts, forcing everyone inside it to rethink their position. Inside the office,





Peggy is always separate, always apart from the crowd. Not only has her role changed from secretary to copywriter, but she has also put on weight, so she is doubly perplexed about how to behave. She is forging a path that no woman has ever trod inside an unfamiliar body. However, she also gains power inside the workplace as she becomes more substantial physically. Her weight distinguishes her from the other secretaries, making her less of an object.

[Go to page 2](#)

Is Draper just a projection or the outline of a man, like the one in the show's title sequence?

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Peggy Olsen's first day of work at Sterling Cooper.

Peggy is pregnant, though nobody knows it, with Pete Campbell's child. She has the ability to generate more than images and ideas; she is potentially producing a family and a home. At the end of the first season, much to her own surprise and indicative of how alienated she has become from her own body, Peggy gives birth and goes into shock. The state declares her incompetent and contacts her family, resulting in her sister's adoption of the child. For most of season two, Peggy struggles with family obligations. Instead of following the traditional path for a young woman from her neighborhood, she has decided to become a professional, but her family resents her for the decision and continuously seeks to put her back into her rightful place. Peggy rejects this path, ignoring her son and redoubling her efforts inside the workplace, which is more of a home to her than the one her family inhabits.



After his bachelor party, Pete Campbell spends the night with Peggy Olsen.



Peggy and Pete have a second tryst in the office.



Peggy continues to work even as the others throw an impromptu office party to watch the 1960 election returns.



Peggy presents her ideas for copy on a product called "the rejuvenator."



Peggy alone at her apartment.

During the show's second season, Peggy's mother and sister force her to become active with their church. They accept Peggy when she knuckles under and conforms to the image they have of her. Whenever she asserts her independence, whenever she strives to live up to her full potential, she is opposed and rejected. She can be at home as long as she reaffirms her family's worldview, which is working class. Having discovered another way of seeing, Peggy cannot return to her home. Perhaps this is why, in the second season, Peggy's storyline is so closely aligned with the church. The forbidden fruit comes from the tree of knowledge. Peggy's eyes are opened and she wants more out of life, even presumptuously expects more, but her mother and sister are determined to hold her back, to teach her to accept her rightful place in life.

alongside and not beyond them.



Draper promotes Peggy to Copywriter.

Additionally, Peggy keeps Pete's illegitimate child secret from him until the end of the second season, when she reveals that she gave the baby away. She rejected the creation of a potential family with him, preemptively destroying another possible home for Campbell. Peggy's character is socially mobile, moving between classes and beyond traditional sex roles. She casts off her childhood home along with the one she has accidentally made (with the baby) in favor of one she has yet to create. Her storyline emphasizes the challenges women face in the workplace. She is forced to deny all things homely, her mother, sister, church and child, in order to thrive in the office and to move away from her working class roots.



Much to her own surprise and indicative of how alienated she has become from her own body, Peggy gives birth and goes into shock.



Draper visits Peggy in the hospital. He says, "Get out of here and move forward. This never happened. It will shock you how much it never happened."



Peggy's mother pressures her into attending church. The mother and sister are determined ...



... to hold Peggy back, to teach her to accept her rightful place in life alongside and not beyond them.



Peggy keeps Pete's illegitimate child secret from him until the end of the second season, when she reveals that she gave the baby away. She rejected the creation of a potential family with him, preemptively destroying another possible home for Campbell.

Perhaps it is our perspective, but even the smallest actions seem to carry tectonic implications. We know the upheavals the characters of *Mad Men* have to look forward to: assassinations, Vietnam, race riots, culture wars, Watergate, the Reagan Revolution, 9/11 and the current financial meltdown. So when something apparently small happens, we can project the consequences and either hope or despair.

In season 2, episode 8 (*A Night to Remember*), when Office Manager, Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), temporarily takes on the job of script reader for the newly formed TV sales department, the opening may be in part due to Peggy's earlier successes. It's easy to project some proto-feminist movement, even as the harsh sexist environment reasserts its dominance through the hiring of an inexperienced man to permanently take over the new position. The department has become successful because of Joan's insight into how to sell soap to women and when interest will be piqued on daytime TV. When Joan discovers that she has been unceremoniously replaced — the torpedo bra torpedoed — and is expected to train her replacement, her disappointment is



overwhelming. (Or is that our disappointment?) The emotion is allowed only the briefest moment of escape before Joan's façade reasserts control.



When Office Manager, Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), temporarily takes on the job of script reader for the newly formed TV sales department, the opening may be in part due to Peggy's earlier successes.



When Joan discovers that she has been unceremoniously replaced and is expected to train her replacement, her disappointment is overwhelming.



In pursuit of the Nixon campaign, the executives at Sterling Cooper screen a Kennedy ad. Campbell comments, "The president is a product; don't forget that."

The program's richest moments are ruptures like these, brief moments when the characters experience confusion or disappointment but then struggle not to let it show, when their real selves and the images they have constructed come into conflict. These are moments of vulnerability, of reality asserting itself briefly into the world of the image. Our clean, colorful 60s fantasy is interrupted by such casual brutality. We are reminded of the real constraints under the binding clothing, the actual challenges and limitations of the period.

*Mad Men's* producers reanimate 60s iconography in order to level it. Most scenes are shot from a low angle, which gives the impression the characters are rising up and looming over. It is the shot usually reserved for the heroic, but in this case it is used so democratically that the device is disabled. The style elevates the characters while tearing down the larger-than-life, making the heroic ordinary, but somehow still iconic.

*Mad Men* is set firmly against the backdrop of nearly mythic events from our own recent history. Much of the first season is taken up by the agency's pursuit to represent Richard Nixon in his 1960 bid for the White House against John Kennedy. Later, Jackie Kennedy's televised 1962 tour of the newly refurbished White House plays in the background throughout one episode (*For Those Who Think Young*). TV news reportage of the Cuban missile crisis is foregrounded in another (*Meditations in an Emergency*), pointing out the real hopes and real risks of a turbulent history we wish to romanticize.



Jackie Kennedy's televised 1962 tour of the White House is featured prominently in one of the episodes of *Mad Men*.

In season 1, episode 6 (*Babylon*), Sterling Cooper executives have a meeting with the Israeli Tourism Bureau, which seeks to capitalize on the popularity of Leon Uris's recent bestseller, *Exodus* in order to improve the country's image. In the meeting, one of the clients remarks that the word "utopia" comes from *utopos*, meaning the good place and *útopos*, meaning the place that cannot be. Don contacts Rachel Menken, his other Jewish client, and also a woman he is sexually pursuing, to get some advice on the campaign. Her response, "Jews have lived in exile for a long time." As a Jew, she says, "I don't have to live there. It just has to be." This strikes a chord with Don, because he, too, is an exile, from his own past.

In *Mad Men*, homeland and home are fragile concepts. Israel is a struggle, but it must exist. The Cuban missile crisis reminds us of a world on the brink of self-annihilation; the characters react with the proper amount of uncertainty and





The Cuban Missile Crisis is the backdrop for the last episode of the second season.

fear.

Even though the people of *Mad Men* understand the power of the image to create new realities, and endeavor to make over reality using these images, they also understand that images are real. In season 1, episode 11 (*Indian Summer*), Peggy's family sets her up on a blind date with a deliveryman from her old neighborhood. When he claims that advertising doesn't work on him, she replies that when advertising is good, you don't know it's working. Later, after Peggy's date disparages her job and insults her by pointing out that she may pretend to be from Manhattan but doesn't look like the women who live there, Peggy leaves in a huff, saying, "Those people in Manhattan... are better than us. They want things they haven't seen." They want an illusion and are working toward its creation.

In season 1, episode 8 (*The Hobo Code*), Don takes a Polaroid of his bohemian girlfriend, Midge (Rosemarie DeWitt) and her beatnik friend, Roy (Ian Bochen). After the image develops, Don remarks that Midge and Roy are in love. He spends every day faking such images and knows when he sees the real thing. Realizing that he doesn't belong in the West Village, that Midge is not his home, Don ends the relationship. The Polaroid has shown him the truth; it's an image he cannot ignore.



"Every day I make pictures where people appear to be in love. I know what it looks like." Don says after taking a Polaroid of ...



... his mistress Midge and her beatnik friend Roy. "You make the lie. You invent want." Draper is expelled from Greenwich Village.

In the first season finale (*The Wheel*), Draper is charged with selling a new Kodak slide projector, which the company refers to as "the wheel." Even though we know that Draper's personal life is coming apart, he fills the slide projector with family photos. During the meeting, Draper describes nostalgia (quoted above) as "the pain from an old wound," and he tells his clients that they are not selling technology but memory.

"This device isn't a spaceship; it's a time machine. It goes backwards and forwards. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called the wheel. It's called the carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels, around and back home again to a place where we know we are loved."

Draper transforms the object into an idea, filled with fantasy images of a life well lived. The images represent something that is not there and never really was; they are only a representation of a wished-for reality. This is what *Mad Men* is all about. It's an unfaded memory of a time gone by.

The Kodak Carousel might mimic the childhood conveyance, family photos rising and dropping as it advances. But the images tell half-truths of idealized moments, birthday candles about to go dark and smoke. It's not a time machine



Don takes out a home movie camera to drunkenly capture his daughter's birthday party.



Draper's daughter in her party dress.



Draper captures the moment when one married guest is rebuffed after making an inappropriate pass at the divorcee who has just moved in down the block.



Even though we know that Draper's

after all, because it's not possible to go back. The wheel is a closed system that keeps replaying the same scenes over and over. It's just another set of images, a selection of those moments we have chosen to remember and to share, that were documented for the purpose of remembrance.

We don't photograph the parts of our lives we know we will want to forget. We are already in the process of choosing when we take out the camera, and of editing as we depress the shutter. We are constructing a vision of the wished-for life when we shoot, but the camera is a machine that only partially submits to our control. It sees what it will, capturing that something in the background we failed to notice, waiting to come into focus, to take over and become what really happened, after we have put the camera down. This is illustrated in season 1, episode 4 (*The Marriage of Figaro*), when Don takes out a home movie camera to drunkenly capture his daughter's birthday party. The scenes the camera captures are intercut with the action. Draper not only films children charging about in party dress and an intimate kiss between a husband and wife, but also the moment when one married guest is rebuffed after making an inappropriate pass at the divorcee who has just moved in down the block.

*Mad Men* captures those gleaming images of a perfect place and an idealized time, but also turns to reveal the specter in the background that is waiting to come into focus. In it we find the source of our unease.

Perhaps this is why the series is set in the early 1960s, the "golden age" of advertising. Perhaps it is an attempt to explore the tenuousness of modern existence. It's fun to think of these characters as naïve or even as sleek but primitive versions of our much more sophisticated selves, to think of their world and their time as "simpler" than ours. Much political discourse is centered on the wish to return to a "simpler time," but there are no simpler times. The wish to return to the past is a wish to stop time, to use the "time machine" of the Kodak Carousel to go back to a place where the living was "easy." As Foucault describes this way of thinking,

"In this hatred of the present or the immediate past, [there is] a dangerous tendency to invoke a completely mythical past." [8] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

The 60s, a decade that culminated with a man setting foot on the moon, will forever be identified with progress in the U.S. imagination. Change was rapid and inevitable, but slow in coming. When we think of that decade, we remember the hope of Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.; the non-violent protests of the Free Speech and Civil Rights movements; the Summer of Love, Woodstock, a youth explosion. We remember the good, choosing not to remember that all of these "good fights" were in reaction to war, discrimination and oppression. It is the folly of memory and part of the pain of nostalgia, the pain of the thing we wish to return to vanishing in a mist, irretrievable because memory is faulty, memory fades. *Mad Men* undoes the relation between wholesomeness and the past, and in so doing, the fiction reveals the true nature of our home, the real resistance inside the heroic struggle.

Looking back on these characters and this era, one can see the excesses wrought by the desire to ignore history, the desire to pretend that the problems we now face came out of nowhere and haven't been with us all along. The men and women of *Mad Men* are the architects of the world we now inhabit. Their activity is to modify reality, to create a desire so strong it becomes a social force. We watch them develop our world and fabricate our dreams, but we must also

personal life is coming apart, he fills the slide projector with family photos. He renames the invention, "It's not called the wheel. It's called the carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels, around and back home again to a place where we know we are loved."

recognize that these people and these dreams are flawed. This is the birthplace of the information age, when we learned to reach and lost our grip. The men and women of *Mad Men* cannot be shielded from the turmoil to come, because they are the people who will make it happen out of the materials of their own turmoil. They inhabit the pictures in our family album, resplendent in their gorgeous youth, captured in frozen smile at the office party — the cheating husband crushing the soul of his doormat wife, the aunt whose nephew is actually her son, the casual bigot, the bachelor uncle, the scheming social climber — tragic heroes all. We would like to believe they were otherwise, but they were just people. History is littered with them, our history — the story of our home.



Each week *Mad Men* begins with a silhouetted figure of a man stepping into an office and putting down his briefcase to the sound of slowly descending violins. As he contemplates the far wall, the office dissolves ...



... and the man begins to fall through a cityscape of gleaming skyscrapers. Animated billboards dominate the landscape, featuring mostly images of women, or various parts of women. The man is reflected in them as he falls.



The ad man continues to fall. The buildings dissipate, leaving a sea of floating advertisements that rush forward. Is it a representation of ...



... a splintered reality dominated by images, a world which briefly dissolves into just advertising and nothing more, no character, no landscape, just image?

[Go to Notes page](#)

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

1. The American Movie Classics series *Mad Men* is set in 1960s New York and follows the lives of the men and women of Madison Avenue, the U.S. center of advertising. Created by Matthew Weiner, a writer and producer on *The Sopranos*, the series opens in 1960 and centers on Don Draper, the Creative Director of the fictional advertising agency, Sterling Cooper. The program, which finished its second season in the fall of 2008, has won three Golden Globe Awards and six Emmys. The series stars Jon Hamm, Elizabeth Moss, Vincent Kartheiser, January Jones and John Slattery. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 74.
3. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 23.
4. Appears as a title card at the start of *Mad Men*, Season 1, Episode 1 (*Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*).
5. Each week *Mad Men* begins with a silhouetted figure of a man stepping into an office and putting down his briefcase to the sound of slowly descending violins. As he contemplates the far wall, the office dissolves and the man begins to fall through a cityscape of gleaming skyscrapers. Updated lounge music tinkles along with the descent, offering a jaunty counterpoint to the melancholia of the violins. Animated billboards dominate the landscape, featuring mostly images of women, or various parts of women. The man is reflected in them as he falls. The buildings dissipate, leaving a sea of floating advertisements that rush forward. The figure continues his fall, his jacket flapping in the wind. One expects the character to land broken on the street, but instead he dissolves and is found again, sitting comfortably, his arm slung over the back of a couch, a cigarette dangling between his fingers. It is a representation of Debord's world of the spectacle, "the commodity contemplating itself in a world of its own making."

Is this the silhouette of Don Draper? Is it the expression of Draper's worldview, the imagined dream world of an alienated image worker who creates and consumes his own dreams? Are we witnessing his world crumbling? Or does the sequence represent the character's fear, that the illusion he has created will be shattered and he will be discovered as a fraud? Is it a representation of a splintered reality dominated by images, a world which briefly dissolves into just advertising and nothing more, no character,



no landscape, just image? Or is it our own experience of a fracturing world? Seen weekly, from the vantage point of early 2009, it is so easy to read this sequence as a comment on recent events, on towers crumbling, banks failing, a society unraveling.

Ultimately, the sequence is destabilizing, it removes the floor, cracks the landscape and, like a trip through a time tunnel, lands in a more stable place, the world of the past, where everything has already happened. But it's only a dream of stability, one that shows us what dreams are made of, or at least where our current information-economy dreams were born.

6. Theodor Adorno, "Tough baby," *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso), 45.

7. Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 225.

8. Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power," *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books), 24.[\[return to page 2 of essay\]](#)

## Works cited

Adorno, Theodor, "Tough baby," *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso)

Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995)

Foucault, Michel, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press)

Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power," *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books)

Marx, Karl, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company)

Packard, Vance, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: Random House, 1957)

Riesman, David, *The Lonely Crowd: Revised edition, A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)

Wilson, Sloan, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (New York, Da Capo Press, 2002)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Surprised by Cylons

review by [David Greven](#)



*Battlestar Galactica* is a brilliant, maddening, quirky, exasperating, enigmatic, dubious series.



The new *Battlestar Galactica* takes the pre-existing mythology to daringly unusual places.

*Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*, ed. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall. New York: Continuum International, 2008. 295 pg. \$18.68

*Battlestar Galactica* (BSG), the *Sci-Fi Channel* series currently airing the second half of its fourth and final season, is a brilliant, maddening, quirky, exasperating, enigmatic, dubious series. A re-imagining of a silly but oddly beloved ABC television series of the 1970s, the new BSG takes the pre-existing mythology to daringly unusual places. Human beings of the future or the distant past created robots, the Cylons, to serve them. The Cylons rose up and made war against their creators, decimating nearly the entire human population in the war that commences the new series' narrative.

Religious fervor is one of its surprising innovations. Polytheistic, the humans worship the gods of the Ancient Greeks. In contrast, the Cylons are monotheistic, worshipping the “one true God”; their campaign against the humans is a form of jihad. Fascinatingly, the Cylons of this series have “evolved” from the clanking, immense red-beam-eyed metal robots of the original series into lushly fleshy human-looking beings. These human-like Cylons, “skin jobs” as the Colonial (human) Fleet call them, provide the most fascinating aspects of the current *BSG*. In their uncanny resemblance to human beings and mysterious passions, these Cylons excite the science-fiction imagination, taking the genre to exciting new places. If only the human beings were half as interesting.



The Cylons of this series have “evolved” from the clanking, immense red-beam-eyed metal robots of the original series into ...



... lushly fleshy human looking beings. For all its brilliance, *BSG* is also invested in traditional notions of gendered and sexual power.

I am aware of the immense cult following the series has generated, and I am in awe of many of its achievements. It's well-acted and often dazzlingly well-written, with one daringly imaginative new concept and plot twist after another. But for all its brilliance, *BSG* also seems to me a highly suspect series. And for



The series reflects a new sci-fi grittiness.



Called the Old Man, Adama, as Olmos plays him, is reassuringly paternalistic.



*Battlestar Galactica* could certainly be called the anti-Trek.

all the hoopla, *BSG*'s success is, at best, a limited one, given that it has lasted for precisely as many seasons as the last, disastrous *Star Trek* series, *Enterprise*. The interest sparked by the series has derived as much from timing as it does from the series' own strengths. Emerging in the wake of September 11th, the series reflects a new sci-fi grittiness that is as determined by the changed political and social landscape of the post-9/11 era as it is by innovative approaches. Precisely what garners the series so much praise — its engagement with current hot-button moral issues such as terrorism and abortion and its ideological "complexity" — is also what makes it a difficult series towards which to maintain a position. The series goes through so many permutations of its premise and of its own moral sensibility that after a time we wonder what, if anything, it's ultimately trying to say.

Luckily, we have a lively new collection of readings as a guide to this maddeningly enigmatic series. *Cylons in America: Critical Readings of Battlestar Galactica*, edited by Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall (Continuum, 2008), offers an intelligent and diverse array of interpretations. While some of the essays are disappointingly lackluster, several of them are first-rate, and on the whole the collection engages and impresses with the acuity of its insights. The essays are divided into three sections:

- "Life in the Fleet, American Life," which primarily treats the series as an allegory for post-9/11 America, terrorism and torture being especially frequent topics;
- "Cylon/Human Interface," which explores the myriad issues of identity raised by the human-like Cylons; and
- "Form and Context in Twenty-First-Century Television," which covers topics as diverse as misogyny, music, and Nietzschean philosophy on the series.

"Television isn't supposed to make us think like this," the editors write of *BSG*'s apparently bold vision (5). "*BSG* forces us to rethink what we knew" (8). The editors position *BSG* as a series that goes places where no other ventures to. While the series indubitably innovates the sci-fi genre, it is also part of a wave of revisionist, genre-bending, genre-splicing other series on television. It is also part of a massive re-imagining of the potentialities of the television medium, which has undergone an aesthetic make-over in the past decade, which Suzanne Scott's essay "Authorized Resistance: Is Fan Production Frakked?" touches upon. The extent to which *BSG* should be taken as something truly "new" is, I believe, an open question.

Potter and Marshall establish that the innovative nature of this science-fiction work stems from executive producer Ronald D. Moore's own mandate to reinvent the genre. They quote him as saying that

"a new approach is required. That approach is to introduce realism into what has heretofore been an aggressively unrealistic genre."

*BSG*, in Moore's phrase, is "Naturalistic Science Fiction" (5). This nod to one of the major genres to emerge in the literary realism of the latter nineteenth-century is intriguing. Naturalism eschews any sense of individual self-determination or free will, taking a deterministic, scientific view of human nature. In one of naturalism's exemplary texts — Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) later made into the film masterpiece *Greed* (1924) — a young woman from a poor immigrant family wins a cash prize. The prize destroys her relationship with her big, lumbering, mentally impoverished, dentist husband,





*BSG's* portraits of women are pointedly topical.



The series itself has issues with women in power.



The extent to which *BSG* should be taken as something truly "new" is an open question.

the titular McTeague, as it drives her to greater levels of self-imposed deprivation. We watch as the gears of fate relentlessly spin and these lives are inexorably destroyed by "good luck." In similar fashion, we watch the humans of *BSG* suffer intensifying levels of pain for their hubris after they have made the fatal error of reaching a level of culture that is too technologically sophisticated.

As Potter and Marshall argue, the show succeeds by disrupting "known modes" and fragmenting "extant systems"; it's a "generic fracturing" that achieves a "level of social commentary that cannot be achieved anywhere else on modern television," one that refuses any kind of "*Star Trek* utopian imagining of power well held" (5). Significantly, Moore worked on *Star Trek* for many years, and with its violently apocalyptic scenarios and endlessly maintained levels of paranoia, *BSG* could certainly be called the anti-Trek. As the editors point out, *BSG* has connections to Virgil's *The Aeneid* and to *The Book of Mormon*, "which describes how the prophet Lehi took part of the tribe of Joseph to precontact America; this is rewritten as *BSG's* Thirteenth Tribe" (7), precedents that also existed in the original series but are greatly expanded upon in the new one.

Brian L. Ott's argues in his essay, "Reframing Fear: Equipment for Living in a Post-9/11 World," that whereas "the Cylons in the original series represented our social fears about technology, the Cylons in the new *BSG* represent our social fears about cultural difference" (16). Ott establishes the show's allegorical impact in the context of our current "War on Terror," especially in terms of the series' representation of the Cylons as the non-human Other: "if one does not see an enemy as human, then one does not feel compelled to treat 'it' humanely" (17). Ott details the repeated scenes of Cylons being tortured on the series, as well as the human references to them as "machines," "toasters," and "skin jobs."

"In addition to degrading the Cylons, such language homogenizes them, reinforcing the prevailing perception that they are all the same and can thus be treated as one nameless, faceless enemy" (17).

Ott points out that the most salient issue is

"not what Cylons are, but what they represent on the show. .... In simultaneously humanizing and dehumanizing the Cylon prisoners, *BSG* frames torture in ambivalent terms. .... The ambivalent frame encourages reflexivity — an awareness of our complicity and cooperation in war" (19).

Working through the framework of the philosopher of rhetoric Kenneth Burke, Ott praises the series for its "scathing critique of the Bush administration and its foreign policy" (22) and for not offering "a singular position on political dissent," which encourages "viewers to judge for themselves" (24).

Erika Johnson-Lewis's essay, "Torture, Terrorism, and Other Aspects of Human Nature," picks up where Ott's essay leaves off. "*BSG* complicates easy or obvious answers to the question of what it means to be human" (28); "*BSG* usually refrains from moralizing" (32). Bringing in the work of theorists such as Elaine Scarry, Judith Butler, and Giorgio Agamben, Johnson-Lewis examines the series' representation of what Agamben terms "bare life (*homo sacer*), or life abandoned by human and divine law" (33).

"In blurring the boundaries between human and inhuman, between





Sharon, an Asian-American Cylon, is an especially troublesome character.



"Long Live Stardoe! Can a Female Starbuck Survive?"



It's with the Cylon characters that the show truly approaches the level of daring sci-fi poetry: "BSG offers a new television rendering of the uncanny."

barbarism and civilization, and by exposing that anyone might find himself in the no-man's-land of the exception, stripped to bare life, *BSG* asks us to resist the Manichean logic of 'with us or against us,' when its only possible outcome is not only dehumanization of the other, but the dehumanization of ourselves" (38).

Along related lines, Carl Silvio and Elizabeth Johnston, in their essay, "Alienation and the Limits of the Utopian Impulse," raise the Marxist question of alienated labor. They ask about the series,

"Should we read *BSG* as an ideological critique that seeks to call attention to the inherent contradiction between our experience of the alienation inherent in the wage relation and our faith in the supposed benefits of a market economy for human society?" (43).

Though critical of the series' "lack of overt ideological critique," the authors finally conclude that

"[*BSG*] stands as such a fascinating and complex work of art precisely because it resists being reduced to simplistic dichotomy. In making this assertion, we intend more than a facile affirmation of the value of artistic ambiguity, and instead suggest that this ambiguity may in fact lend itself to more effective ideological critique" (50).

"*BSG* invites us to identify with and invest ourselves in competing and contradictory attitudes toward its utopian themes" (51).

These three thoughtful and intellectually wide-ranging essays set the tone for the essay collection and for its general view of the show as being admirable in its refusal to palliate its audience and in its "complexity." I will return to this thematic of complexity below.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

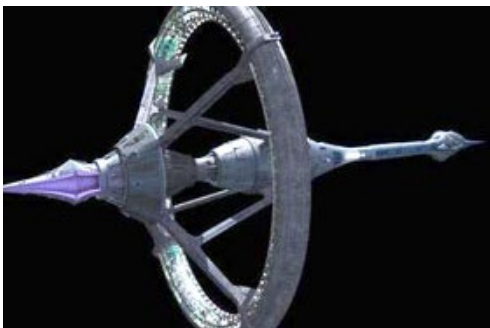
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*Battlestar Galactica* frames torture in ambivalent terms.



Stripped to bare life, *BSG* asks us to resist the Manichean logic of "with us or against us."



*BSG* turns *Trek* on its head.

Rikk Mulligan offers a reading of some significant second season episodes, "Pegasus" and "Resurrection Ship," which feature Admiral Cain. As played by Michelle Forbes, Cain is an unflinchingly tough leader of the Pegasus, another Battlestar that managed to survive the Cylon attacks. Mulligan's essay is the first in the reader with which I strongly disagree. Although it raises an important issue, the new series' re-gendering of several male characters from the old one, this essay largely dispenses with gender critique in favor of investigating the ethics of command. This is especially unfortunate given the crucial role gender plays in the episodes with Admiral Cain. It strikes me as no coincidence at all that the most unrepentantly villainous character on the *BSG*-reboot is a woman. To my mind, the most troubling aspect of the series is its bizarre treatment of its female characters.

Case in point: when President Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell) negotiates with the Cylon Leoben (Callum Keith Rennie), who has threatened the Galactica with a bomb, she initially speaks the language of conciliation. However, as soon as she gets the information that she needs, she commands, "Throw him out the airlock." The series seems to be providing a pointed critique of assuming that a female leader will have a nurturing maternal quality. But when I see a female military commander depicted as not only far more violent than her male counterparts but emotionally unstable as well, like Admiral Cain, I begin to wonder if the series itself has issues with women in power. Add to that the fact that the series regularly provides a reverential treatment for its male in command, Commander William Adama (Edward James Olmos). Called the Old Man, Adama, as Olmos plays him, is a reassuringly paternalistic, tough old bird, lending the series a gravitas and a stability that derives from traditional gender roles.

Mulligan writes,

"Cain's character is not an indictment of women in military command, but is instead a criticism of leaders who overstep their bounds, abuse their power, and lose their perspective" (53).

Mulligan further argues that "the world of *Galactica* is not ours; it is one of science fiction where gender does not inhibit women in military service" (57). I'm not so sure. *BSG*, as most of the writers of this reader point out, is our world, a show made very much with the current political contexts in mind. In an era in which a woman ran for U.S. President with a very strong chance of securing the nomination and another woman ran for Vice President, *BSG*'s portraits of women in power are pointedly topical. Cain isn't just tough; she's close to homicidal. Cain played a decisive role in the *Pegasus* treatment of the Cylon Gina, who was repeatedly beaten and raped. Such actions are one of the clearest indications of her amorality *and* her anti-woman stance. That she has no compassion whatsoever for a fellow female, even a female Cylon, seems to attest to her adoption of a masculinized sensibility. The hard, unyielding Cain is a cartoon of the phallic woman, yet what is even scarier about scripting her this way is that her character principally serves as a negative contrast to Adama's benevolently patriarchal rule.

The executioner Roslin and the phallic Cain are joined by the character of

Starbuck (Katee Sackhoff) in being female characters who aspire to a masculinist ideal. Discussing the latter character, Carla Kungl, in her essay, “Long Live Stardoe! Can a Female Starbuck Survive?,” does a good job of documenting the baroque misogyny that greeted Starbuck’s gendered make-over of this character, which was played by Dirk Benedict in the original, Katee Sackhoff in the new. But something Kungl does not address is the absurdity of fan hostility to Sackhoff’s female Starbuck precisely because she embodies such a stereotypical masculinity. Aggressive, foul-mouthed, hard-liquor-swilling, and swaggering, this Starbuck is a roughhousing rowdy with little “feminine” charm. This character should be exhilarating, but excruciating would be a better description. What makes the gender-bending new Starbuck — who spars with male characters in the boxing ring and is the Fleet’s best pilot — more bruising than bracing as a character is her reliable penchant for brutality.



The series’ oddly retrogressive gender portrayals intersect with race.



The show’s gender politics are actually anything but utopian.



Starbuck is an exemplary instance of what has been called the female chauvinist pig of contemporary times.



Is the world of Galactica “not ours, but one in which gender does not inhibit women in military service”?

For example, in Season Three, when bridge officer Felix Gaeta (Alessandro Juliani) is being hounded for his apparent betrayal of his fellow humans on the Cylon-occupied New Caprica, Starbuck is amongst the most virulent of the secret society clamoring for his death. In a scene that eerily matches the one in which Roslin transforms from compassionate to cruel, Starbuck sits with ostracized Felix, appearing to offer him much-needed support, only to reveal that the animosity she feels towards him runs frighteningly deep. Starbuck is an exemplary instance of what has been called the female chauvinist pig of contemporary times. The marvellously dynamic Sackhoff gives her Starbuck a poignant sense of insecurity but cannot, in my view, redeem this frustrating character.



The series’ human characters are beset with limitations that reveal the show’s failure of vision and its underlying conservatism. It’s with the Cylon characters that the show truly approaches the level of daring sci-fi poetry. In one of the best essays in the collection, “Uncanny Cylons: Resurrection and Bodies of Horror,” Alison Peirse convincingly argues for the series’ brilliant innovation upon



*BSG* complicates easy or obvious answers to the question of what it means to be human.



"Cylon culture can be viewed as an allegory of the modern immersion of the individual in mass society."

Freud's theories of the uncanny. In a stunning reading of both Freud and of the series, especially its uncanny human/non-human Cylons, Peirse argues,

"[*BSG*] offers a new televisual rendering of the uncanny, transforming traditional notions of the uncanny... [presenting] endless doubles with the ability to regenerate through downloading. The televisual uncanny occurs initially through the presentation of the double, but it can be argued that then the real horror takes place when the double recognizes itself and does not fear replication, for, as noted by Poe and Freud, the presentation of the double is often an uncanny sign of imminent death" (127).

Peirse finds that *BSG*'s "complex televisual rendering of the uncanny and horrific body offers a far more stimulating and intellectual account of the ontology of horror and the uncanny than the unrestrained recent cinematic releases" in the torture porn category (129).

Christopher Deis explores themes of race in his essay, "Erasing Difference: The Cylons as Racial Other." In Deis' view, black male characters are provocatively represented, erased, and depicted in stereotypical fashion, all at once. By displacing race-based anxieties onto the Cylon Other, the series misses an important chance to explicitly explore "human nature and human society in a time of crisis" (167). Indeed, in agreement with Deis, I find it fascinating the way the series' oddly retrogressive gender portrayals intersect with race.

In this regard, "Sharon" (Grace Park), an Asian-American Cylon (model number 8) with many distinct versions of her character, strikes me as an especially troublesome character. As numerous male characters fight over this Cylon line, Sharon is presented as docile, conformist, and loyal, on the one hand, and as hypocritical and treacherous, on the other. In her relations with numerous male characters, the Sharon-model subtly calls to mind images of the Asian seductress, as alluring as she is duplicitous. In an appealing but also frustrating essay, "To Be a Person': Sharon Agathon and the Social Expression of Individuality," Robert W. Moore offers a reading from a Kierkegaardian perspective of the Sharon character, who works against her Cylon brethren and for the humans (she is married to a human). "The goal of life for anyone, in Kierkegaard's view, is to become an existing individual before God," Moore observes (108). "Cylon culture can be viewed as an allegory of the modern immersion of the individual in mass society" (108). As evidence that he is not offering a heterosexist reading of the Sharon character, one that would argue that "woman is incomplete without the love of a man," Moore claims that

"the social world of *BSG* precludes such a reading. *BSG* is set in a nonpatriarchal world. On gender issues the show is utopian, despite its overall dystopian tone" (110).

As I have been suggesting, the show's gender politics are actually anything but utopian; they depend on traditional gender conventions and also betray considerable anxiety when female characters occupy traditionally male roles. Despite his claims to the contrary, Moore's reading of Sharon perpetuates gender stereotypes. It's not simply that Sharon can nimbly negotiate being an officer as well as a wife and mother. It's that her very claim to a human status is wholly dependent upon her fulfillment of normative, non-threatening marital and maternal roles. When she kills a fellow Cylon, the reason is because Sharon fears that her daughter, Hera (a human-Cylon hybrid), is being threatened. Overall, Moore's essay evinces the pitfalls of philosophical criticism. Philosophical treatments of film, increasingly prevalent in academe and scholarly trade publications, too often eschew urgent real-world concerns such as gender, sexuality, class, and race to focus instead on abstractions of such



*Battlestar Galactica* has traded in the idealism of its preexisting mythos for



gritty, hard-hitting complexity.



Polytheistic, the humans worship the gods of the Ancient Greeks.

concepts as the “the Good Life,” as Moore does here. His fine, nuanced discussion of philosophers like Kierkegaard and Rousseau cede to a bland account of Sharon’s conformist human socialization, the disturbing implications of which appear to be lost on Moore.

Along similar philosophical lines, the final essay in the collection, “All This Has Happened Before: Repetition, Reimagination, and Eternal Return,” by Jim Casey reads the increasingly central theme of repetition from the standpoint of Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return, quoting from the nineteenth-century German philosopher’s *The Gay Science*: “This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again” (242). Casey sees the idea of eternal return as developed on the series since it “offers the possibility of affirmation.” Nietzsche’s ideas, Casey argues, gesture towards redemption by allowing us to transcend both the cult of individuality and “historical repression” (248). Casey specifically cites Starbuck’s redemptive return from death in Season Three, as well as the theme of Cylon resurrection. He also positively offers Adrian Lyne’s dreadful, pretentious horror-masquerading-as-spiritual-uplift film *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990) as a similarly redemptive narrative towards which the revamped *BSG* series gestures.



Religiosity as a theme undermines the series' complex questioning.



Spirituality functions in the script as an antidote to otherwise ardent cynicism.

I would argue that the theme of religiosity in *BSG* is disturbing, in much the same way as it was on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, in which Ronald Moore also had a large creative role. Themes of spirituality and religion are of deep value, and popular culture texts have every right to explore these issues. Yet both *DS9* and *BSG* use religion aggressively as a way of settling the pointedly unsettling questions they raise about identity, military power, collectivity, and human nature. On both shows spirituality functions as an antidote to otherwise ardent cynicism. The shows' rigorous decentering of established narrative modes and previously positively held institutions — the Federation on *DS9*, the human Fleet in *BSG* — is compensated for by the religious ardor that becomes increasingly crucial to each series. This is a much larger point than my review can encompass, but I would treat with much greater suspicion than Casey does *BSG*'s religious themes, particularly the heavy-handed, gratuitously ominous themes of repetition, which the latter half of Season Four seems to foreground.



The editors position *BSG* as a series that goes where no one has gone before. Is this a bold vision of the future or the same old military myths?

Overall, the collection, stimulating though it is, suffers from several of the same limitations of this provocative but also disturbingly retrogressive series. Few of the essays, to my mind, go nearly far enough in interrogating the show’s conservatism, especially in terms of gender roles, though Chris Dzialo, in his essay, “When Balance Goes Bad: How *Battlestar Galactica* Says Everything and Nothing,” makes an attempt to do so. All of the series’ numerous troubling, chilling dimensions can ultimately be accounted for by the belief in the series’ “complexity,” which would appear to balance out its inconsistencies and alleviate its ideological tensions, tensions which actually may not really be



"Naturalistic Science Fiction"



We presumably see human nature at its most "raw" in the New Naturalism.

tensions so much as they are indications of a preponderantly reactionary sensibility. In my view, *BSG*, though a better, more daring, and more carefully conceived series, bears a great resemblance to the last, failed Trek series, *Enterprise* (which I have written on for *Jump Cut*). Unlike *Enterprise*, *BSG* does seem critical of the last decade's Presidential administration's stances in the United States. However, like *Enterprise*, it has traded in the idealism of its preexisting mythos for gritty, hard-hitting complexity — for an unvarnished, more mature, more brutish vision.

In this manner, shows like *BSG*, *Enterprise*, *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, and *24*, among others, can be called a new genre, the New Naturalism, one marked by a kind of violent ambivalence. In the New Naturalism, no guiding moral tone is taken about dubious characters whose actions grow increasingly suspect. Without a guiding moral tone — which represents, in addition to a potential naiveté or sentimentalism, a courageous decision to put one's values out there — the series can maintain a detached, neo-Naturalistic outlook on its characters. But as the New Naturalism shows evince, this detachment can be duplicitous and serve as a cover for a highly cynical desire to offer an unremittingly pessimistic social view. Much more troublingly, it can be a deeply hypocritical stance, one that purports to be objective but actually is much more idiosyncratically and commercially driven. These days, despair sells. Watching any number of reality series or fictional ones in the New Naturalism vein, we see people and scripted characters writhe in torment and humiliation. We see human nature at its most "raw," its most "willful," in its most "natural" state. This is no less a construction and a fantasy than *Star Trek*'s prevailing utopian future of peaceful, cooperative humanity. It's just the cynical and no less adamantly maintained alternative to utopian optimism.

---

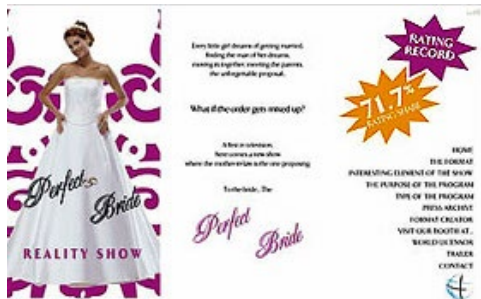
[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Homepage of the show's web site. Visitors can view trailers of the Italian, Turkish, and Middle-Eastern versions. The site lists the program's interesting features: mother-son conflicts, fights between brides and mothers-in-law; competition between girls; family interference.



The Italian site of "La Sposa Perfetta" presents biographical sketches of all the contestants, photos of the villa where they reside during the competition, and a daily journal of behind-the-scenes events.

## Global formats, gender and identity: the search for *The Perfect Bride* on Italian television

by [Michela Ardizzoni](#)

"Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." — Albert Einstein

Since the popularity of MTV's *The Real World* in the early 1990s, reality television has been the focus of scholarly attention. This genre had been in existence for a few decades but revamped and reinvented at the turn of the 21st century. Academic research has provided working definitions for the newly popular genre and related it to the televisual flows and audiences' appeal for voyeuristic simulacra of reality (Murray and Ouellette, 2004; Andrejevic, 2002; Lewis, 2004). Several critical studies published in the early 2000s reflect a sense of urgency in examining this as a transient phenomenon that might fade away any time soon in the chaotic and overly populated television market. Yet, sixteen years have passed since the first season of *The Real World*, and reality formats are still prospering on U.S. television and small screens worldwide. What began as one of the many ephemeral trends in the television industry has now become a staple genre of many public and private networks, which rely on its adaptability, low costs, and an international industry circulating globalized media formats that feeds a constant demand for novelty.

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, television industries in various countries were facing a changing economic landscape, characterized by a growing number of networks, more fragmented audience, emergence of recording devices (first the VCR, then TiVo), and increased competition for advertising revenues (Raphael, 1997). In this period, television distributors vied for smaller advertising shares and had larger debts. At the same time, producers witnessed a tremendous increase in production costs, due principally to the prominence of the star system for the above-the-line labor (Raphael, 1997). In this context, reality TV emerged mainly as a financial survival mechanism for the deregulated television industry (Murray and Ouellette, 2004). The new format had low production costs and could survive independently of unionized writing and acting talent. In addition the format was popular, and reality TV was initially celebrated as a new public forum, where common folks could take center stage and audiences could experience a new, mediated kind of reality. Also, the semi-scripted nature of most reality-based programs allowed for their adaptability to be edited around commercial breaks and to insert advertising in the body of the program. This economic strategy was further enhanced by the possibility of expanding a program's reach beyond the television box to a variety of other media, such as Internet sites, text messaging, YouTube, social networks, etc.. These extensions of content offered viewers' more active participation and allowed reality television to maintain audience interest long after the end of each televised program. Furthermore, "[t]he fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real," as Murray and Ouellette argue, is what has made reality television an important and, in some ways, innovative forum to discuss cultural and representational issues (1997: 2).





Mothers and sons are featured together – as a couple – in the online bios.



The online forum allows viewers to take an active part in the decision-making process of choosing the perfect bride.



Viewers are invited to vote out one of the mothers-in-law.

The claim to reality, promoted as the main appeal of this new format, has urged critics to compare it to the much older format of the television documentary. Both genres use similar shooting techniques and video technology, yet they fundamentally differ in their objectives. While reality television is imbued with clear entertainment and commercial values, documentaries aim to fulfill informative (and, perhaps, educational) purposes. In this respect,

“mobilizing a 'discourse of sobriety,' documentaries reference established traditions of ethical and political mandates for their own form. Although observational documentaries tend to concentrate on the mundane, everyday, and personal – and as a result, can appear just as obsessed with the intimate as reality TV – they are seen by many viewers and critics as doing this for the greater good of the subject, viewer, and society at large.” (Murray, 2004: 43).

In this way critics often juxtapose the "social weight" of documentaries against the frivolous and commercial nature of reality television. However, other critics encourage us also to pay attention to the various ways in which reality TV challenges mainstream stereotypes on gender, race, and sexuality and offers alternative avenues for the re-negotiation of social variables (Kraszewski, 2004).

I am particularly interested in looking at reality programming within the context of Italian television, which seems to exemplify the transnational fervor for this genre. Indeed, between 2001 and 2007, thirty-two reality formats were featured on television in Italy, with several formats running for more than one season (*Il Grande Fratello* – 8 seasons; *L'Isola dei Famosi* – 5 seasons; etc.). Two main elements stand out in this context:

- first, there are surprising number of reality formats in a fairly small and highly concentrated television industry (with three public service channels and four private channels);
- second, there is an almost even distribution of reality formats between the public network RAI (carrying fourteen programs) and its commercial counterpart Mediaset (with seventeen programs).[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

The latter aspect is worth paying attention to as it bespeaks a complex convergence of public and private media content and a kind of competition that can only be played by the rules of commercial television.

Since its debut in the Italian market in the 1980s, the private network Mediaset, owned by former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, has functioned as a counterpoise to the public broadcaster RAI. With the same number of channels (three for each) and the same target audience during primetime, for the past twenty-five years Mediaset and RAI have developed side by side (Ardizzoni, 2007). As the data about reality formats show, this parallel progression has often resulted in the commercialization of public television and the increasing weakening of a public service sector, heavily penalized by commercial dictates and globalization forces.[2] In this respect, institutional (and commercial) support for reality formats in the three RAI channels has often been perceived as signaling RAI's fall from grace and disdain toward carrying more dignified programming, and ultimately as indicating that public television is no longer interested in serving the public sphere.





The opening credits of the program feature the title 'La sposa perfetta' with a black-and-white image reminiscent of the 1950s classical bride.



In the studio, mothers-in-law (on the right) and brides (on the left) face each other. The two sets of women are visually separated by the gigantic screen that allows the grooms-to-be to peep in the conversations.



Mothers-in-law enter the studio at the beginning of the program.

For a brief moment in April 2007, the Italian television industry seemed to be taking a new, contentious direction when RAI's President Claudio Petruccioli expressed his opposition to reality television and promised that the format would no longer be a staple in RAI's programming. In his words,

"Reality TV shows put people into environments that are both unrealistic and coercive. And what inevitably results is unjustified and degrading behaviour. I don't believe they are the type of shows the majority of our viewers expect or want from a public service broadcaster." (Quoted in Fraser, 2007).

However, Petruccioli's motion for banning reality programming from RAI was rejected by the RAI administrative board, when reality producers threatened to go to Mediaset instead. Clearly the financial and economic stakes were too high for RAI and the possibility of losing large revenues seemed too daunting, even if the network's public service goals would be strongly undermined. Thus in spring 2007, despite RAI's resolution to choose reality programs that sustained a certain level of educational and civic value, the second public channel aired the first (and only) season of a format that challenged boundaries of decency in order to re-inscribe traditional social patterns. This was the program *La sposa perfetta* (literally, "The Perfect Bride"). The program introduced to Italy a new format from Turkey, in which

"a cabal of mothers set about the task of choosing the perfect bride for their spoiled and complaisant sons." (Popham, 2007)

The structure of this program and more general ideological discourse in which the program prospered reveal important issues about global television formats. Here I will use the example of *La sposa perfetta* to examine how the global nature of reality formats is ultimately redefined by the overwhelmingly local nature of national and regional cultures. In particular, with the analysis of this program I wish to analyze the extent to which global formats can become trendy, appealing mechanisms for maintaining normative gender behaviors and patriarchal narratives of identity. As Waisbord claims,

"Contemporary television is a Janus-faced industry that in the name of profitability needs to commodify real and imagined nations while being open to global flows of ideas and money. The global circulation of formats responds to programming strategies to bridge transnational economic interests and national sentiments of belonging." (2004: 10-11)

## Origins of the format

The Turkish format for *The Perfect Bride* was created by Lutfi Murat Uckardesler and promoted by the British Global Agency Ltd. Very little information about the creator or the agency is currently available in English, with the exception of the promo web site [www.perfectbride.tv](http://www.perfectbride.tv). Upon entering that site, the visitor is welcomed by an introductory flash animation that sets the tone for the content of the page. Here, a white, red-haired, young bride, wearing a traditional white wedding dress and a tiara, is framed by a fuchsia Arabesque design. The title *Perfect Bride* appears at the bottom of the screen, and two wedding rings are used as visual connectors between the two words. The bride-to-be appears innocent, malleable, and acquiescent, with her head tilted to the side, a pale smile on her lips, and her hands gently resting on her hips. The bride idealized in this image is



One of the brides makes a longer, more sensual entrance through a spiral staircase.



Mother and son arrive on stage holding hands, thus visually reinforcing their strong relationship.



Mother and son discuss relationships while sitting on a red, heart-shaped sofa.

romantically feminine and purposefully aligned with traditional heteronormativity. This overall impression is confirmed once the visitor is allowed into the content area of the site. Here, the reader finds the narrative description of the program:

“Every little girl dreams of getting married, finding the man of her dreams, moving in together, meeting the parents, the unforgettable proposal ...What if the order gets mixed up? A first in television, here comes a new show where the mother-in-law is the one proposing ... to the bride ... the Perfect Bride.”

This text is framed on the left by the opening image of the bride and on the right by static visuals about the program's popularity (the words, “rating record,” appear in one frame and below that “71.7% rating share”). The site's home page incorporates the binary of commerce and sentimentality that Waisbord mentions. On the one hand, a sense of cultural belonging is reinforced by the use of the word “every,” which attempts to standardize views of heterosexual love and connect them indissolubly to marriage. On the other hand, economic profits are guaranteed by the graphic on the right, which uses “hard numbers” to convey a sense of scientific reliability and potential profitability to advertisers.

Throughout the site, awkward linguistic choices[3] reveal a non-native use of English, a frequently found within global television formats. As Moran and Keane examine the cultural power of the international formats industry, in the past three decades English has become a global “medialect”[4] used at festivals, fairs, and in transnational transactions. The choice of English as (what Collins calls) “the language of advantage” reveals the extent to which global television formats are nowadays reflective of more complex capitalist and Anglo-centered forces:

“[A]lthough formats appear to be culturally and linguistically neutral and highly malleable, such that this kind of template can be adapted to another market with consequent adjustments in relation to matters of culture, customs, history, religion and language, such formats are not, however, culturally and linguistically innocent, single, isolated, standalone entities. Rather, they are complexly structured entities already embedded and shaped by particular contexts...” (Moran and Keane, 2006: 82)

In *The Perfect Bride* Internet site, the use of English indicates that the producers have a marketing strategy in line with the industry's Anglo-centric tendencies. Yet, other issues around cultural capital are also embedded in this linguistic choice. As Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977) remind us, all social practices involve both a passive and an active component. In this case study of a Turkish program being adapted for Italian television we see both indications of the institutionalized use of English within the global television industry and the symbolically proactive entrance of Turkey into the international media market. Geographically and culturally located between East and West, Turkey is undergoing serious internal and external scrutiny in relation to its request to enter the European Union.[5] So in the case of this program, the use of English as a global medialect and Turkey's embracing reality television as a (predominantly) Western format invest *The Perfect Bride* with the necessary cultural capital to penetrate the porous borders of the European Union via Italy.

Before reaching Italian shores, *The Perfect Bride* found success in the Arab world. The Lebanese adaptation was broadcast on the popular private channel LBC and featured contestants from the entire Arab region. In this case, the transnational nature of the contest easily elicited from viewers nostalgic reflections on local identities and nationalistic reactions. As in the case of other reality-based shows broadcast on LBC, the decision to keep the original English title appealed to both local and international Arab audiences, who seem very comfortable with the Anglo-





Before breaking for commercials, audiences are reminded of the three main character types in this format: a cheerful, naïve-looking son; a stern, conservative mother; and a cunning young bride.



Brides-to-be look on as the judges discuss their behaviors.



One of the sons is featured as the Latin lover, who is allowed to engage in more than one relationship at the same

centric focus of these shows. Yet, unlike other programs that target primarily young audiences with some knowledge of English, *The Perfect Bride*'s focus on family relations provides entertainment for older generations as well. Hence, the need to combine the hip English title with the Arabic subtitle *Qesma wa nasib* (literally, "Sharing and what you deserve"). Here, the Arabic titling is deliberately vague and open to interpretation: depending on the subject, the "object" to be shared can be the bride or the son.

The export of this format to both Italy and the Middle East confirms that cultural proximity helps guarantee the transnational success of television formats. As argued by Straubhaar (1991), global formats find better acceptance in social contexts that are culturally similar, though not necessarily part of the same geographic region. Multiple studies have thus illustrated cases of television series and reality formats that have traveled to culturally proximate countries:

- LaPastina and Straubhaar's research on telenovelas (2005);
- Trepte's (2003) comparative overview of European countries;
- Burch's (2002) study of Indian soaps in Nepal.

The crossover of *The Perfect Bride* can be understood in similar terms. Although Turkey, Lebanon, and Italy have quite distinct political and religious realities, these countries have social patterns that conform to similar moral and familial values. These societies share a view of "family" as the essential unit of social life, and "marriage" becomes the focal point of convergence between the individual and the group, the "I" and the "We," the bridegroom and his family.

## *The Perfect Bride in Italy*

Family life — in all its complex variety — is provides the element of novelty in this reality show. As the description of *La sposa perfetta* points out,

"The set for the program is family life. In this context, there is no greater and funnier clash than the one between future mothers-in-law and brides."

Unlike previous programs in which participants performed in individual competitions, *La sposa perfetta* exploits societal fascination with the classical Italian family, a trope that has proven extremely successful in other genres — from cinema to television dramas to game shows. In considering family structure, at this point I need to discuss briefly a special bond that characterizes mother-son relations in Italian culture. Often defined as a culture of "mamma's boys," Italy is rated as one of the countries with the highest percentage of adult males living with their parents: 85% of men between the ages of 18-33 live in their parents' household (Manacorda and Moretti, 2005). Several studies have investigated the possible reasons behind this trend and they generally concur that a combination of economic and cultural factors is at play here. Increasing unemployment rates and lack of entitlement to unemployment benefits convince many young adults that living with their parents is the only viable solution until a more stable job opportunity presents itself. Yet, this economic explanation has recently been challenged by Manacorda and Moretti, who claim,

"An important and neglected factor explaining these remarkably high rates of co-residence is that Italian parents like having their children around and are willing to 'bribe' them into cohabitation in exchange for some monetary transfers. Italian parents benefit from the companionship and other services their children provide, and most importantly, from the opportunity they have to get their children to 'conform' to their precepts when they live together" (2005).

time.

The emotional attachment that derives from this long period of co-residence is particularly evident in relations between mother and son and the indissoluble ties that bind this pair. In this context, the choice of a bride often interacts with stereotypical expectations towards the newlywed. Similarly, comparisons between the caring skills of mother and bride frame the often-conflictual relations between the two women, who vie for son/husband's attention and affection. Within this unique socio-cultural context, a show like *The Perfect Bride* prospers by focusing on the intricate, bickering bonds that shape the Italian family.



Mothers await the arrival of their sons on heart-shaped sofas with heart-shaped pictures of their offspring.



The heart-themed studio includes the judges' sofas.

In the program, studio design reinforces this emphasis on blood ties, with red, heart-shaped sofas for each mother/son pair to sit on, and in bedroom decor, where a framed photograph of each mother above her son's bed provides an ominous reminder of what matters in life. In an act of apparent "double surveillance," the future bridegrooms are subjected to both the scrutinizing eye of the television camera and the watchful, top-down look from their mothers. Yet, a further analysis of the program's visual and verbal discourse soon reveals that this narrative of matronly subjugation is only apparently explanatory. The mothers' seeming dominance is, in fact, is superficial and masks more complex patriarchal patterns that are in clear synchronicity with mainstream television flows in Italy. Before I delve into this analysis, let me first describe the main characteristics of *La sposa perfetta*.



During their free time at the villa, the sons take walks in the garden while wearing only their underwear.

The only season of the show ran in the Spring 2007 on the second public channel, RAI 2. The two-hour long, weekly program aired on primetime, while half-hour daily updates were regularly shown in the afternoons. As with most reality shows in Italy, the choice of adding quotidian recaps functions as a marketing and advertising strategy to sustain the audience's attention through a focus on more informal intrigues in the participants' homes. Hence, these afternoon peepholes offer another (seemingly more direct) opportunity for viewers to partake in the life/love stories evolving within domestic space. Since Internet usage in Italy is still divided along generational lines, these short afternoon television programs are considered necessary tools to guarantee a continued interest in the show.





While brides-to-be compete for one man and one prize, potential grooms enjoy themselves with several Brazilian dancers.



A guys' fight over girls is stopped by an assertive mother-in-law.

The show's stated purpose is for future mothers-in-law to choose an appropriate bride for their sons. The two generations of female contestants are required to share a villa, aptly called "Villa La Suocerina" (literally, "Villa of the little mother-in-law") and to interact on a daily basis. As in other reality programs, these daily encounters present numerous occasions for sharing secrets, forming alliances, and expressing ideological, cultural and generational differences. These differences become particularly evident when the women converse about what the important characteristics of a "perfect bride" are. While the sons' desires are always put as the main priority, the mothers-in-law never cease to emphasize the importance of cooking, cleaning, and general house management skills. These are indeed the elements that shape the mothers' choices about who should be eliminated each week. In the weekly edited recaps, the mothers constantly emphasize the young women's lack of domestic skills. In the third episode, for example, Mamma Teresa comments with frustration: "When it comes to household chores, none of these girls is really worthy." This statement comes at the apex of a series of clips that featured the young women in distress upon trying various domestic activities (cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, etc.) and failing miserably in the mothers' eyes. Another time, when Airin, a 34-year-old contestant from Latvia, is at the stove, Mamma Rosa from Naples looks on suspiciously and interrogates her on every ingredient used for the dish. In addition, as in many other instances throughout the episodes, this interaction reveals not so-hidden views on national identity and culture. "



The program's host (at the center) reads a list of daily chores that the brides must complete: ironing, cooking, washing, cleaning, and other household tasks.

[Go to page 2](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Above each son's bed is an ominous picture of his mother, casting an always watchful eye on his decisions.



A bride and her father discuss her romantic preferences ...



Significantly, the mothers-in-law become more demanding when judging a woman from another cultural background. Of the eighteen young women selected for the program, five were of non-Italian origins. This offered several opportunities for mothers to consider a non-traditional bride for their sons, yet these opportunities were rejected in the face of strong cultural differences. Thus the young woman from Latvia is judged as too old and too cold for the Italian "dolce vita." Similarly, Luana, a 23-year-old dancer from Brazil, is a frequent target of discrimination because of her job: "A dancer can never be a good wife" is the awkward justification given by some mothers when they choose to eliminate the Brazilian woman. Here, dance is clearly aligned with the exoticism of Luana's physical appearance and is perceived as a threat to the traditional all-Italian family. But, perhaps the most evident expression of what Stuart Hall (1990) calls "inferential racism" came in the opening episode of the program, when the group of brash and impertinent "mamme" agreed on eliminating the dark-skinned Judith. Despite her cooking skills, good looks, education, and respectful, pleasant manners, the older women found her appearance too "colored" for their (and their sons') orthodox views on family and culture. The images of the mothers offered to the viewers are characterized by the older women's condescending and patronizing attitude towards the young women, who seem to deserve a spot in the program (and, vicariously, in the young men's lives) only thanks to their physical attributes.

However, the program itself relies on surveillance and display. In particular, the display of the female body as a scientific specimen or consumable object is common in Italian television. Most public and private channels adopt a voyeuristic lens to frame women's bodies, perceived as the essence of their identities. As argued by Berger apropos painting, in television women's presence and actions are often enclosed by the male look:

"To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men" (1973: 46).

In this sense, the woman's personality is split between two constituents — the "surveyor" and the "surveyed" within herself. As clarified by Berger, the woman understands she must manage her exterior representation because it is fundamental to the ways in which she will be treated socially. Gender interactions are clearly based upon a system of power relations informed by a patriarchal perspective. This is surely so in the case of Italy. In Berger's words,

"One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision: a sight." (1973: 47)

The male gaze that informs most women's roles in Italian television affects the perception women have of themselves and necessarily regulates visual representation and discourse. Hence, fictional and real women in television display a de-valorizing attitude towards their female counterparts. Their role as interviewees, for instance, is downplayed by a lack of proper introduction or emphasis on women's credentials; rather, a paternalistic approach highlights the physical significance of women rather than their potential intellectual or ideological contribution to a discussion (Cornero, 2001: 82-84). This particular



... then the bride's father reminds a groom-to-be to behave with his daughter.



Two lovers discuss their relationship in front of the audience, the judges, and the mothers-in-law.



Men sunbathe in the garden while debating on women's sex appeal.



Brides and mothers-in-law face off in a competition of joke telling: the in-studio

way of framing women in television is evidenced not only by the interactions between hosts, interviewees or fictional characters, but also by specific camera movements that effect a consistent pattern of filming women. In this pattern generally there are a series of close-up shots that begin at the feet and move up to the head; these shots introduce the woman, thereby underlining her physical appearance. Often the camera lingers upon specific body parts (breasts, hips, eyes, mouth) and overtly connotes them in a sexualized way by zooming in to a detail shot. This type of camera work frames the female figure as long as she is on screen and defines her discursive interventions.[6] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

In *La sposa perfetta* this emphasis on the body defines the role of the brides-to-be. Information about the young women's height, weight, age, size of clothes, and physical attractiveness is also primordial in the online description of each contestant. A juxtaposition of each bride's "identikit" allows viewers as well as mothers-in-law to compare and rank the eighteen women based mostly on physical attributes. The centrality of bodily performances finds constant reiteration as the weekly edited narrative accentuates the time the young women spend on improving their looks. Close-up shots in bathroom scenes, where the women put on make up, struggle with their hair, or check their breasts, are regular reminders that physical attributes will eventually determine the winner of the competition. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the "perfect bride" at the end of the series turns out to be Alessia, a 20-year-old brunette from Naples, who embodies the typical Mediterranean looks.

As in several other programs on Italian television, the young women are heavily subjected to scrutinizing shots by the cameras in the studio. For instance, when the wannabe brides enter the studio each week, they do so while descending a glamorous staircase and wearing revealing evening gowns. The individual catwalk of each contestant is awaited by the viewers at home, the audience in the studio, and the couples of mothers and sons, who are seated in their red sofas in the center of the stage. Through the vicarious eye of the camera, we as viewers subject the young women to a voyeuristic survey of their bodies and clothes each week. This kind of patriarchal voyeurism is further emphasized by the decision-making power of the mothers-in-law, who in this moment of the show must express their preferences for each contestant. The voting process in this case is emblematic of the underlying ideological patterns of this show. While the brides walk down towards the audience, the mothers maneuver a hand-stick up or down depending on whether they like or dislike the young women. The phallocratic symbolism embedded in this voting system is quite evident and alluded to by the male host of the program, who jokingly contends: "some things go up and down in life." The patriarchal nature of Italian television finds perhaps its clearest expression in this program, where women view themselves and other women through the same flattening and objectifying lens.

It is worth remarking at this point that this unflattering portrayal of Italian culture did not go unnoticed in the Italian and foreign media. Soon after the first episode aired in April 2007, statements from left- and right-wing politicians, journalists, and pundits shared a general disdain for what was perceived as a regressive use of public television. The Italian Federation of the Press (FNSI) released a statement in which *La sposa perfetta* was defined "uncivil, vile, and squalid." The same statement also pointed out that, before launching the program, RAI had just signed a five-year contract through which it committed to strengthen its public-service mission by avoiding stereotypical and discriminating views on women. In her column in *La Repubblica*, feminist journalist Natalia Aspesi noted that "the country of televisual mothers-in-law seems to originate from sketches ... of the Fascist era." In her article poignantly titled "And Italy plummeted into the country of mothers-in-law," Aspesi exclaims incredulously:

"What muck this is! If we are talking about a game to amuse the easy-going masses, it bears saying that state television really needs to put a

audience decides which woman is the best at telling jokes. This is one of the many trivial competitions that the women have to take part in.



One of the brides takes care of the laundry at the villa.



A talkative and intrusive mother-in-law decides to lecture the young women on how to manage the finances in a couple ...



limit to the rubbish, the vulgarity, the lies, the rudeness, and the denial of social changes that happened 50 years ago." (2007)

The program's novelty and protests about it were picked up by the international media with reports that emphasized the resilience of the "mama's boys" stereotype and RAI's insistence on broadcasting dubious reality shows. Hence, following Pomroy's article in the Canadian *The Globe and Mail*,

"In a country where it is normal for unmarried men to live with their parents into their 30s and 'mamma mia!' is a common exclamation, the Italian mother figure is revered by society but often feared by girlfriends and wives."

TV critics said the program exploited the stereotype of the overbearing mama. "It's the most grandiose, caricatural, corrosive demolition of the image of the Italian mamma," said Italy's leading daily, *Corriere della Sera*. Elisabetta Povoledo in the *International Herald Tribune* comments on the discrepancy between what is broadcast on RAI and what the network's president envisioned for public television. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, RAI's president Petruccioli expressed his concern about the low quality of reality programming and promised, abrupt new changes, yet commercial competition and financial obligations prevented any such change from taking place. As Povoledo concludes,

"In Italy, it's harder than it looks to trash reality tv."

Besides the economic profitability of reality formats, the popularity of the genre with different audience demographics and cultures still needs to be explained thoroughly. Media scholars and psychologists alike have attempted to account for the success of a genre that was originally perceived as "just a fad." Most research tends to agree with findings that point to the desire for status as the most important attitude that distinguishes reality viewers from other viewers (Reiss and Wiltz, 2001). The allure of achieving celebrity status in ways that are far from celebrity life seems to be the catalyzing force behind people's decision to participate in or watch reality-based programs. Hence, the small screen becomes the magic wand that turns quotidian life into mass-appealing events. In defending *La sposa perfetta* from the attacks it received, Antonio Marano, the director of RAI 2, pleads,

"[The show] brings to the light of day relationships that are eternal. You can joke about it, but we are talking about problems of behavior that many people live with." (Quoted in Povoledo, 2007)

From this perspective, then, *La sposa perfetta* embodies the characteristics of therapeutic discourse that are often identified as key to talk show formats (White, 1992). Indeed, Marano's support of the program seems to suggest a potential for audience identification but also a possibility of their finding solutions to personal problems. This strategy has been successfully adopted by talk shows with their emphasis on crises, discourse, and relations. As Peck points out in her research on Oprah Winfrey and Sally Jessy Raphael,

"These programs are fueled by social tensions that originate 'outside' the shows, but are imported 'inside' where they become the conditions of the talk and the site of ideological labor. This sets in motion the programs' internal contradiction: they address social conflicts that can never be fully resolved on television, while holding out the possibility that talking will lead to, or is itself a form of, resolution." (1995: 59)

In this respect, it is not surprising that a substantial part of *La sposa perfetta* relies on the conversations and discussions carried on live in the studio. The discursive interaction between mothers-in-law and brides, or between these women and the



... then moves on to teach them about sexuality and men's sexual preferences.



Brides-to-be are being watched as they dance alone at the villa.



As in every reality-television format, contestants share their feelings during the moment of confession.



In 'The Perfect Bride' the confession

invited guests, provides the ideological stage upon which all relational problems and familial contentions are laid out. To achieve the therapeutic effect frequent on daytime television, *La sposa perfetta* straddles a line between the reality format and the talk show genre. In fact, the regular viewer of reality shows might be astonished at the amount of time each episode spends on live discussion among the female participants. The program places a strong emphasis on intergenerational conversations. This interaction, the producers argue, allows for more disagreements and verbal fights and consequently provides more appeal for the audiences in the studio and at home. While these moments certainly function to guarantee sustained interest and higher ratings, I suggest that they also embrace a more complex goal: the creation of a primetime environment where women are the protagonists and their voices are audible. Yet, as my analysis indicates, this seemingly empowering center-stage position of women in *La sposa perfetta* conceals more nuanced gendered patterns and reinforces the patriarchal framework of Italian society in the 21st century.

As Hall and others have argued, the media are instrumental in creating a semblance of vital needs and pivotal interest, and they do so through a metonymic extension of elites' interests to the whole of society (Hall, 1979). Thus, mainstream media are used as selecting tools to shape the realities central to the maintenance of hegemonic positions in society:

"The media circulate 'definitions of reality' that are 'favorable to the dominant class fractions' which come to constitute the 'lived reality' of the subordinate classes as well." (Hall quoted in Peck, 1995: 58)

The kind of consensus that is necessary for the continuation of hegemonic relations "must be perpetually re-created and resecured." (Peck, 1995: 59)

This constant process becomes even more apparent in counter-hegemonic contexts, where subordinate groups have challenged dominant positions. Italy has witnessed mild resistance and opposition by feminist and leftist groups, which has resulted in overt acts of censorship [7], on the one hand, and more subtle re-definitions of the feminine "sphere of competence," on the other. The case of *La sposa perfetta* is a clear example of how the media's ideological work exploits the popularity of reality formats to re-inscribe dominant values and morals.

As mentioned earlier, *La sposa perfetta* revolves around women. Women are the contestants as well as the judges in this competition, and it is their decision that determines the characteristics of the televisual "perfect bride." Thus, most episodes of the program focus on women's discussions in the studio and in the house. Here, younger and older women debate their relation to the male contestants, their emphasis on familial values, and their skills in household chores. In the third episode, for instance, the week's events edited for the audience highlight the inevitable tensions in the house between a group of mothers and a few brides: the diatribe centers on cooking habits, cleaning patterns, and gossiping. The emphasis on these participants is then pursued in the studio, where one young woman is put on the spot and made the focus of the mothers' (and audience's) attention. Fernanda, a 23 year-old from Turin, is asked to sit alone in the center of the stage, where her role is to reply to the criticisms she receives from the mothers-in-law because of her behavior in the house. This section of the program is absolutely dominated by female discourse and feminine interests. The male contestants, for whom all this is happening, sit in complete silence by their mothers' side. This element is particularly striking on mainstream Italian television, usually dominated by men's discourse on primetime. A further element of ostensible female empowerment comes from the decision-making procedure: as stated above, it is the mothers' role to choose or eliminate the brides-to-be. However, this is only an "apparently" empowering tool. A closer look at the dynamics of the program reveals the superficiality of these strategies and connects "real" power to the men (in the studio and at home).

seat is the bottom of a staircase.



Men relax while chatting about the young brides on the other side of the fence.



Male contestants sit in the house as they observe the discussions taking place in the studio.

The second part of the weekly program usually features the three brides who have received the lowest scores from the mothers. Emphasis is placed on the reasons behind these choices and the young women's reactions at facing elimination and their last pleas to be rescued. A final round of decisions has the mothers select one among the three contestants as the person who should be evicted from the house. Yet, in a surprising turn of events and after much discussion in the studio and in the house, the mothers' decision is not ultimate and can be reversed. The final, non-deferrable power to approve or reject the elimination is bestowed upon the bridegrooms, who, until this moment, have sat silently, smiling or nodding innocently. At this important juncture one man is allowed to speak up and share his verdict of the young woman.

The choice of the male contestant here is the result of a convoluted competition that seems only to serve the purpose of reinstating dominant patterns around gender roles. In episode 3, for example, the male contestants, who are aptly nicknamed "James Bond," compete against each other to find a golden ticket hidden at the top of a dam. Their transportation — lifted from a helicopter to a raft — and their attire — an elegant tuxedo — are reminiscent of the Ian Fleming hero, ready to face any kind of obstacles to achieve his goals. In this case, the goal is the possibility to rescue a young woman, who might not embody the perfect ideal of spouse.



Men are often featured in roles that reassert their unquestioned masculinity and traditional appeal: in a Bond-like task...



... or bull riding ...



... or being chased in a football field (a sport not popular at all in Italy) ...



25) ... or arm wrestling ...

Hence, the physical strength and dexterity traditionally attached to masculinity in Italian society turn out to be decisive tools in the selection process. After all, the mothers-in-law's decision might be easily overturned by one man's position. What is noticeable here is that, despite their lengthy arguments and thorough examinations, all the women's judgments do not bear the same weight as one young man's determination. The seemingly empowering position of women





Eventually, their masculinity is re-assured only by the power of having two women at the same time.



Soft focus is here used to frame the two lovers remembering happy moments together in the villa.



Mother-in-law and bride argue about men's needs and wants.

throughout most of the episode is negated at the conclusion. Despite their silent demeanor in the studio, the male contestants still have power over the show, over their lives, and over the audience's attention. The show's seeming emphasis on female proactive behaviors unveils a more deeply seated desire to re-secure clear gender boundaries that do not challenge dominant positions in society.

In *La sposa perfetta* the media's ideological work to reinforce consensus is achieved also through the voyeuristic lens that frames women's interactions. In the studio, the women of both generations are subjected to the pungent comments of the guests, who, in their position as "experts," evaluate the women's performances and help the audience make sense of erratic behaviors. Relations are made clear and visible for us, and our understanding is filtered through the guests' viewpoint. Thus, the viewer becomes aware of a mother's obsessive insistence on choosing a bride who behaves like herself and embodies the same qualities. Similarly, a young woman's decision to engage in a relation with a male contestant is explained to us (and justified) by the guests, who seem endowed with a deeper knowledge of human relations. While the women are offered ample space to express their views and concerns, their statements are constantly re-interpreted and contextualized for the audience in a move that ultimately second-guesses and devalues the reliability of women's opinions. The patronizing attitude of most guests' comments conforms to the gendered relations that are typically found on mainstream Italian television: these relations are structured along a patriarchal axis that connotes women's discourse as less meritorious (Ardizzoni, 2007).

An infantilizing attitude towards women's positions is reiterated by the program's constant focus on the rivalries between the women's groups. In fact, both the live discussions and the edited segments emphasize a lack of harmony among the women, who tend to form small cliques and compete for each other's attention and favors. As mentioned earlier, the live discussion physically and ideologically places women of different generations at the two extremes. Here, age differences as well as a different relation to the bridegroom provide a pretext to feature women in contentious situations and highlight the fragmentation of these groups. The same approach is adopted also in the weekly montage that foregrounds the most salient moments of co-existence in the house.

Week after week, female interactions are characterized by verbal disputes, even among women belonging to the same generational group. In episode four, for instance, the emphasis is on Mamma Teresa, who tries to console Aida after Aida has been mistreated by her own son. While the mother is in the courtyard hugging a sobbing Aida, the other older women peep from the kitchen window. This infuriates Mamma Teresa, who comments sarcastically on their gossiping and abruptly leaves the courtyard. This apparently insignificant episode is given more importance in the edited segment (which focuses entirely on this interaction) and the live program, where the contestants are asked to comment on what happened. As evidenced here, divisions within the women's group is perceived as one of the strengths of the program and is consequently highlighted every week. Indeed, the site [www.perfectbride.tv](http://www.perfectbride.tv) lists "fights between brides and mothers-in-law" as one of the program's interesting features, something that could attract women and men alike.

The rivalries among women are particularly striking when juxtaposed to the obvious harmony governing the men's abode. The clips of the male contestants focus mostly on the playfulness of "boys who refuse to grow up" and emphasize their agreement and collaboration on a variety of issues (from sports to



One of the grooms must defend his romantic choice in front of a voyeuristic audience.



A male contestant looks on as 'his' women engage in verbal fights. The almost detached look on his face suggests a lack of emotional involvement in the issues at stake.

relationships and cooking). Thus, while the women are often featured in somber, preoccupied moods, the men seem cheerful and content, knowing all too well that they will be the "winners" regardless of the final results. It is my argument that the representation of women as ultimately divided and fragmented reinforces the dominant position of men in the show and re-instates a deeply masculine and patriarchal understanding of gender relations and societal norms. These traditional views are never questioned or challenged in the program and work to establish patriarchy as the only perspective within which to frame marriage Italian-style.

## Conclusion

In the past decade, reality formats have become one of the most popular genres in the transnational television industry. Their success must be inevitably connected to their easy adaptability and their adaptation to national and local notions of culture and identity. Hence, rather than promoting a more global Weltanschauung, these programs are strategically used to strengthen a cemented vision of identity. In the case of Italian television, *La sposa perfetta* proved to be a successful tool to redraw the boundaries of orthodox marriage and heterosexual relations in a country that had recently witnessed heated debates on gay marriage, abortion, and women's rights. In this sense, the choice to air the program on public television should not be surprising: the public-service role of RAI has been here redefined to exclude inconvenient views and promote more traditional (and Catholic) lifestyles. As a result of this, what could be a Habermasian public sphere is reconceptualized to address only mainstream, patriarchal attitudes. In *La sposa perfetta* the use of the globally celebrated reality format seems to be an ingenious strategy to conceal more problematic notions of gender, identity, and nationality.



Every episode of the program ends with the elimination of one contestant. In this case, brides-to-be line up awaiting their fate.



A disappointed bride complains about the program on the bus back to the villa.

[Go to Notes page](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

1. The other two formats were broadcast on the private channel La7, a minor channel that has often been presented as the "alternative" to the duopolistic diatribe between RAI and Mediaset. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. For more on the decline of public service media, see: Tracey, 1998; Dahlgren, 1995; Holtz-Bacha and Norris, 2001.
3. For instance, the purpose of the program is summarized as follows: "To show 'Bride vs. Mother-in-Law' competition to the millions, which theme has not been mentioned in any competition program until today, and to witness a great competition by disclosing the war full of intrigues lasting for centuries in every detail."
4. An in-depth study of the concept of "medialect" can be found in Hjarvard's article, "The Globalization of Language: How the Media Contribute to the Spread of English and the Emergence of Medialects." (2004).
5. For more on Turkey-EU relations, see: Kubicek, 2005.
6. This section has been adapted from my previously published research on Italian television: Ardizzoni, 2007, chapter 5. [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]
7. In 2001, during the second Berlusconi government, three RAI journalists (Enzo Biagi, Michele Santoro, and Daniele Luttazzi) were criticized and, eventually, fired for having used public television to express their left-wing ideas. For more details on this, see: <http://www.globaljournalist.org/magazine/2006-1/evil.html>

### References

- Andrejevic, Mark (2002) "The kinder, gentler gaze of Big Brother: Reality TV in the era of digital capitalism" *New Media and Society* 4 (2): 251-271.
- Ardizzoni, Michela (2007) *North/South, East/West: Mapping Italianness on Television*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Aspesi, Natalia (2007) "E l'Italia precipito` nel paese delle suocere" *La Repubblica* April 6.
- Berger, John (1973). *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Viking Press.

- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burch, Elizabeth (2002). Media Literacy, Cultural Proximity and TV Aesthetics: Why Indian Soap Operas Work in Nepal and the Hindu Diaspora” *Media, Culture and Society* 24(4): 571-579.
- Collins, R. (1989) “The language of advantage: satellite television in Western Europe”, *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 351-371.
- Cornero, Loredana, Ed. (2001). *Una, Nessuna ... A Quando Centomila?* VQPT. Vol 184. Rome: RAI Eri.
- Dahlgren, Peter (1995). *Television and the Public Sphere*. London: Sage.
- Fraser, Christian (2007). “Italian Tv Bins Reality Shows” April 3 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/6519209.stm>
- Giddens, Anthony (1984). *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hall, Stuart. (1979) “Culture, the media, and the “ideological effect’.” In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, and J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Mass Communication and Society* (pp. 315-348). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Hall, Stuart. (1990) “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media.” In *The Media Reader*, edited by Manuel Alvarado and John O. Thompson. London: BFI Publishing.
- Hjarvard, Stig. “The Globalization of Language. How the Media Contribute to the Spread of English and the Emergence of Medialects” in *Nordicom Review*, no. 1-2, 2004, pp. 75-97 *Nordicom*: Gothenburg University.
- Holtz-Bacha, Christina and Pippa Norris (2001). “To Entertain, Inform and Educate: Still the Role of Public Television.” *Political Communication* 18(2): 123-140.
- Kraszewski, Jon (2004). “Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV’s *The Real World*” in: *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. S. Murray and L. Ouellette, eds. New York: New York University Press, pp. 179-196.
- Kubicek, Paul (2005) “The European Union and Grassroots Democratization in Turkey” *Turkish Studies* 6(3): 361-377.
- La Pastina, Antonio and Joseph Straubhaar. (2005) “Multiple Proximities between Television Genres and Audiences” *Gazette* 67(3): 271-288.
- Manacorda, Marco and Enrico Moretti. (2005) “Why do Most Italian Young Men Live with Their Parents? Intergenerational Transfers and Household Structure” June. CEPR Discussion Paper No. 5116. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=781247>

Moran, Albert and Michael Keane. "Cultural Power in International TV Format Markets" *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1, March 2006, pp. 71–86

Murray, Susan (2004). "I Think We Need a New Name for It" The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV" in: *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. S. Murray and L. Ouellette, eds. New York: New York University Press, pp. 40-56.

Murray, Susan and Laurie Ouellette (2004). *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Peck, Janice (1995). "TV Talk Shows as Therapeutic Discourse: The Ideological Labor of the Televised Talking Cure" *Communication Theory* 5(1): 58-81.

Pomroy, Robin (2007). "Perfect Bride? Let Mama Decide" *The Globe and Mail* April 7, page A2.

Popham, Peter (2007). "Mamma Mia: Tv Hunt for Perfect Bride Upsets Critics" *The Independent* April 7  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/europe/mamma-mia-tv-hunt-for-perfect-bride-upsets-critics-443675.html>

Povoledo, Elisabetta (2007). "In Italy It's Harder than It Looks to Trash Reality Television" *International Herald Tribune* May 6  
<http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/05/06/sports/reality.php>

Raphael, Chad (1997). "The Political Economy of Reali-TV." *Jump Cut* 41 (May): 102-109.  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC41folder/EconomyRealiTV.html>

Reiss, Steven and James Wiltz (2001). "Why America Loves Reality TV." *Psychology Today*. September/October.  
<http://psychologytoday.com/articles/index.php?term=20010901-000029&page=1>

Straubhaar, Joseph (1991). "Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8: 39-59.

Tracey, Michael (1998). *The Decline and Fall of Public Television*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trepte, Sabine (2003). "The Intercultural Perspective: Cultural Proximity as a Key Factor in Television Success" Paper presented at the International Communication Association Conference, San Diego, CA, June 23-27.

Waisbord, Silvio (2004). "McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats" *Television and New Media* 5(4): 359-383.

White, Mimi (1992). *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American*

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### A nightmare of capitalist Japan: *Spirited Away*

by [Ayumi Suzuki](#)



The witch Yubaba who owns the leisure center Yuya.

Hayao Miyazaki, who won the Oscar for the Best Animated Feature in 2003, makes films for children. But he does not turn them into princes or princesses in a fairy tale world; instead he makes them employed workers in a fantasized capitalistic world. In his *Spirited Away* (2001), Chihiro, a ten-year-old girl, wanders into the Yuya, the leisure center of a spirit world, an enterprise owned and managed by the witch, Yubaba. Chihiro becomes trapped in this spirit world, where she must use her only resource, physical labor, to survive. People who live in the Yuya must work to be recognized as valuable human beings worthy of life. As one of the workers tells the girl,

"If you don't get a job, Yubaba will turn you into an animal."

Dave Kehr of *The New York Times* described *Spirited Away* as "a masterpiece, pure and simple." However, the film is much more complicated than that. Not just a simple coming-of-age story, the child's survival story is intertwined with a denunciation of today's capitalist mindset. My goal in this essay is to illuminate Hayao Miyazaki's use of animation and children as characters to criticize Japan's history of capitalism. I find *Spirited Away* the film that most firmly depicts Miyazaki's denunciation of a capitalist mentality, especially in relation to issues we see in post-modern Japan, namely the loss of spiritual value and identity.

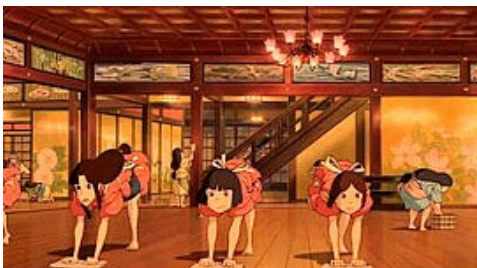
### Hayao Miyazaki: master of anime

Miyazaki's sophisticated art lies not in creating marketable child-friendly animation, but in presenting social criticism through child characters in his animated films. On this point, Miyazaki shares something with a cultural critic of a previous generation, Walter Benjamin (1936). Both Benjamin and Miyazaki have faith in two things, storytelling and children.

Stories can transmit knowledge by integrating that knowledge in a fantastical tale. In this way, listeners can learn not just through receiving information but also by internalizing knowledge as experience. Benjamin explains that there's a new form of communication made possible by new media, which in his time consisted of radio, photography and cinema. This new kind of communication transmits information, which has timeliness and does not leave room for listeners to expand their imagination or capacity for interpretation, because this transmission of information requires that explanations be given at the same time. In contrast, stories provide informational *cues* that trigger creative interpretations on the part of their listeners, and each different interpretation, as it's created, becomes a personal experience which lasts in the listener's mind. For that reason, Benjamin distinguished storytelling from information giving, and in this vein, Miyazaki is a storyteller who uses his films to bequeath his



Chihiro, a ten year-old girl, working in the Yuya.



Other workers in the Yuya.



A boy with a magical power, Haku, and Chihiro running through the world of spirit.



Ukiyo-e: A Kabuki actor.

social knowledge.

Another common element between the two thinkers is their faith in children, and they admire the quality of youthful minds to be filled with curiosity and stay free from the task-minded business of modern day living. Miyazaki believes in the cunning and the high spirits in children; therefore, he utilizes adolescent characters in his films to explore a "mystical" world, which in fact is a fantasized version of social reality. In this way, his films echo thoughts of Benjamin (1936), who says, "The wisest thing – so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day – is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits" (p.11).

This concept of representing a reality through a veil of fantasy can also be found in a Japanese traditional art, Ukiyo-e. Japanese animators have inherited visual aesthetics from the style of the art of Ukiyo-e (Murakami, 2000; Looser, 2006). Cavallaro (2006) points out that Miyazaki, in particular, has an aesthetic similar to Ukiyo-e in terms of his use of two-dimensional drawing and water color. There may be a further philosophical connection between Miyazaki's animation and Ukiyo-e. As a term, Ukiyo-e is usually translated as "images of the floating world"; literally [Uki: float]+[Yo: world]+[E: pictures].

Ukiyo refers to the world without Buddhist enlightenment; that is to say, the world filled with consciousness of mortality. Buddhist teachings warn against craving for anything that is ephemeral or not eternal. People suffer when they lose something they crave, and that moment of loss must come because nothing stays the same. Without enlightenment, people will continue to find this ever-changing world the very source of grief. Our world of grief is Ukiyo.

Ukiyo-e artists depict scenes from "pleasure quarters" (the floating world) such as Kabuki stars, beautiful women, or scenes from a play, namely as objects that people crave. As one desires those objects in Ukiyo-e, or as they experience that desire in Ukiyo itself, s/he must know that one day those objects will disappear, causing suffering. Ukiyo-e's plays on dual senses where "fantasy is pleasure" and "reality is grief"; this is the kind of dual world that Miyazaki always establishes in his films. On the one hand, he elaborates an animated reality based on a contemporary postindustrial culture, complete with the latest technology and products, that eventually transforms into a nightmare. Second, he also establishes a world out of his own fantasy in which a child encounters the vanity of materialism and learns to balance materialism with a need for spirituality there. For him, animation inhabited by children as characters is a radical form that he can use to speak out against the dominant ideology of consumer capitalism – radical because animation is a by-product of modern technology and because children are a special target of capitalist marketing. By using narratives with child characters moving through an animated world, the director aims his vision at a more general audience immersed in a lifestyle of hedonistic consumption.

## *Spirited Away: entering the capitalized spirit world*

*Spirited Away* stages a modernizing Japan in the Meiji period (1868-1912) when Western influences overpowered the nation politically and ideologically and one of the most significant influences from the West to Japan was the reorganization of Japanese society into a capitalist one. During the Edo period



Ukiyo-e: A beautiful woman.

(1603-1867), the autocratic Samurai class controlled the whole nation and Japan closed its door to most other nations in order to preserve itself. In 1853, Commodore Perry from the United States urged Japan to start trading with other nations. In the following year, Japan opened its door to other nations and the Meiji era, which is considered as the period of restoration, began. In this Meiji restoration, the influx of the Western culture brought to Japan both chaos and growth, represented by the mixing of Japanese identity with Western architecture, philosophy, fashion, and values.



Chihiro's parents devour the food in the Yuya.



As a result, they are turned into pigs by the curse.

Miyazaki takes us back to Meiji Japan by sending the protagonist, who was born in contemporary times, to a modernizing Japan. The story goes as follows: Chihiro, an apathetic ten year-old girl, is moving from the city to a rural area with her family. While they are driving to their new home, they wander into a closed theme park, now called the Yuya. It's actually is a leisure center built in the spiritual world by a greedy witch, Yubaba. This mystical town resembles Meiji Japan in terms of architecture, during which time the style was a mix of Western and Japanese. By the witch's curse, Chihiro's parents are turned into pigs, and Chihiro must serve as a laborer at the Yuya in order to rescue them. At the Yuya, she encounters a mysterious boy named Haku, and with his help, the meek girl now learns to meet the challenges of the distressing spirit world. By having Chihiro live in the era of a modernizing Japan, Miyazaki invites the audience to experience what we really were losing as a nation and personally during that period.

## The Yuya: a capitalist society of the spirit world

To begin with, Miyazaki sets up the structure of the Yuya as very class-oriented and he use it to represent capitalist society in general. Chihiro first appears as a





Kamajii, the boiler man. His six arms symbolizes new machinery to minimize the number of employees.

child within a nuclear family, which is the base of capitalist society, providing and reproducing the labor force via its children. While parents are usually responsible for maintaining the family by exchanging their labor for money for their needs, Chihiro's parents are taken away by Yubaba's curse in the film. Thus Chihiro now has to take the responsibility to bring her family back by working for the Yuya. By forcing Chihiro to exchange her labor for what she desires, the film represents her as a working-class worker, a child whose childhood has been stolen from her. In an example that makes explicit Miyazaki's equation of labor with wage slavery, in one scene Chihiro meets Kamajii, the boiler man, who introduces himself as a "slave to the boiler that heats the baths." Since the whole bathhouse is owned and managed by Yubaba, he means that he is a slave to his employer. In addition, Kamajii has six arms to operate the boiler that presents him as new *machinery* that enables minimization of paid employees - not unlike robotics one might see on a production line. While he is working, another female worker brings him food provided by the Yuya, and in another moment, we see Kamajii sleeping right there in his workplace. These cues indicate the Yuya provides him shelter and food only as he provides his labor force; by seizing his forces of production, the Yuya owns him as its property.



Soots bringing coals into the boiler.



Kamajii receives food from Lin. He works, eats, and sleeps in the Yuya.

Moreover, just as the workers must have a job to survive, Yubaba needs their labor to survive. While Kamajii is talking to Chihiro, his helpers, called Susuwatari (soot), who bring coal into the boiler, get distracted. Kamajii then yells at them saying that if they do not work, Yubaba's magic will not work on them anymore and they will be turned back into mere soot. This means that Yubaba actually keeps them alive to work for her. Since she keeps the lower class spirits alive, her character symbolizes the bourgeoisie who own the capital to hire lower-class laborers. She is the only one who does paperwork, who lives in luxurious rooms and owns jewelry, and who dons a dress not suited for physical labor. Yubaba, hence, is positioned as bourgeois and other spirits as proletariat, and the Yuya's functioning depends upon this capitalist system.



A street in the Yuya and ....



... a street from the Meiji era.



In both the animation and the actual construction, we can see ...



... a mixture of Western and Japanese style architecture typical of the Meiji.

## Power dynamics between the West and Japan



Yubaba's office is decorated with Western materials.



Power dynamics, angle up on Yubaba and ...

Yubaba's dominance over the Yuya also symbolizes the power dynamics between the West and Japan. Through the things that Yubaba owns, we can recognize that she represents the West. For example, in comparison with all the workers, who wear a uniform which looks like traditional Japanese clothing, Yubaba wears a Western dress. The whole building of the Yuya — its exterior and interior design — are Japanese except the highest floor where Yubaba works. There, the interior decor is more westernized, with carpets and doors. Everything Yubaba owns, and only that, is styled according to Western taste; this visual aspect of environment in the film is meant to represent the West's dominance over Japan in the Meiji period.

A cultural studies scholar, Koichi Iwabuchi (2002), explains the power dynamics begun during the Meiji period by describing early industrialized Japan as a “faceless economic superpower” whose cultural influence on the globe is still so weak that no matter how strong its economy becomes, “Japan is culturally and psychologically dominated by the West” (2). More recently, in the 1980s, Japanese cultural products, represented by anime and manga, started gaining in cultural influence around the globe. Iwabuchi, however, points out that this kind of influence has happened because Japanese cultural products have become “culturally odor-less products,” that are already Westernized or appear neutral rather than being Japanese (Iwabuchi, 2001). Observing the flux of Japanese culture represented within U.S. media, such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Rob Marshall, 2005) which uses English-speaking Chinese actresses to play Japanese geisha, a Japanese film scholar, Keisuke Kitano (2005), questions his own society: Since when has Japan started depending on other nations' entertainment industries to create an image of Japan? (10) Iwabuchi emphasizes that no such pure Japanese culture that remains the same has ever existed. Rather, Japan certainly experienced a hybridization of civilizations as its national identity has become an amalgam of Japan and the West.

As these scholars observe, a power dynamics of the West over Japan is still alive. *Spirited Away* dramatizes such dynamics by using a powerful character, Yubaba, to symbolize the West. In order to show the consequences of Western economics and cultural values, the film enacts issues common to modernized Japan through what happens in the Yuya and to the main characters.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



... angle down on the powerless.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Devaluing spirituality and human relationships



Myriads of gods from all over Japan visit the Yuya.

One of the problems taken up by the film is people's disinterest in spiritual values in contemporary life. The way the film depicts spirits derives from an indigenous Japanese religion, Shintoism, which the film embodies in myriads of gods called *Yaoyorozuno kamigami* who are the consumer spirits who visit the Yuya. Shintoism posits that the human and spirit worlds exist in the same realm, and spirits inhabit every substance, including rocks, statues, food, and rivers. The origin of these spirits is explained in mythology, in the text, *Manyo-shu*:

"Heaven was so near to earth that an arrow shot from the earth made a hole in the bottom of it through which objects fell which are still found upon the earth. Spirits, both good and evil, were supposed to exist everywhere and Shinto was an unorganized worship of these deities." (Underwood, 1934, p. 16, cites *Manyo-shu*)



The stink god comes to the Yuya to get refreshed.

Since spirits exist in the same realm as human beings do, Shintoism teaches people to have a faith in and respect for spirits that exist in material substances; thus people should have a concern for nature and the rest of the physical world.

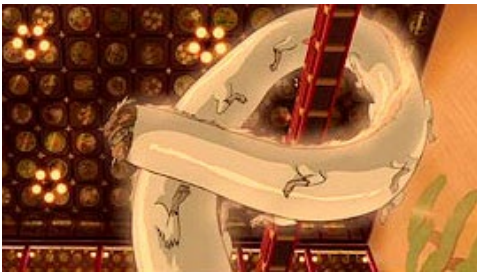
Miyazaki, however, implies that in the modern age, the worlds of spirits and of humans have become separated because humans have neglected spiritual values. In *Spirited Away*, according to what Chihiro's father explains, the Yuya is a ruined amusement park that was built in the time of the "bubble economy." That is, people built the amusement park, which symbolizes a post-industrial leisure-oriented mentality, when the economy was booming. In the beginning of the film, as Chihiro's family is driving past the amusement park, they see stone shrines thrown to the side of the road. Traditionally Japanese people have believed that gods who protect the road dwell in those small shrines so the shrines should be respected. Here construction workers disregarded them to build the theme park and Chihiro's own modern family does not care that these shrines are devalued. In other words, the environment around the theme park indicates that people cared more about creating another place for their own leisure than preserving a place for the spirits and also the spirits of the place. Those neglected divine spirits have become so injured and tired that they too now have to go to a leisure center like the Yuya, a leisure center where in an ironic reversal the presence of human beings is undesired. In one case of an abused spirit needing to recover, the spirit of river comes to the Yuya as a stink god because humans constantly throw refuse into the river. Once the spirit takes a bath and Chihiro removes the stinking refuse from it, it turns back into a noble river spirit. Such an incident within the Yuya implies that the Yuya's business depends for its success on the neglect of spiritual value in post-modern Japan.



Bulky refuse that the workers pull off the Stink God.

The incident with Chihiro and the stink god is not only about neglected spiritual values, however; it also creatively demonstrates one of the strengths of animated film —flexible visual expression. Miyazaki masterfully utilizes that strength to animate the imagination and to visualize unseen emotions.

Previously, in Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997), when a boar god who was



After getting rid of the refuse, the Stink God transforms itself back into its original form, the River God.



The boar god in *Princess Mononoke* surrounds itself with dark tentacles...



... representing its rage against humanity.

supposed to protect the forest and humans got injured by an arrow, it transformed itself into a cursing god raging against humans. Its rage was manifested as dark stringy tentacles around the boar that demonstrated both the rage's force and also the ugliness of human actions when considered from the perspective of nature. Likewise in *Spirited Away*, by making the noble river spirit into a filthy stink god, Miyazaki indicated that filth that the noble spirit had to wrap itself in was a manifestation of the stains upon nature caused by the human society's current way of life.

In *Spirited Away* Miyazaki also visually separates the worlds of spirits and humans. Stylistically he depicts the human world as realistically as possible and the world of spirits as fantastic. In the beginning of the film, before Chihiro's family wanders into the world of spirits, Miyazaki utilizes cinematic moments that are unusual in animation but more often found in live-action films. Only after the family enters into the town of the Yuya does the mise-en scene become more fantastically animated. The shadowy spirits and buildings and everything that is in the amusement park take on life, but now a fantasmic life. Those visual cues that indicate a movement from verisimilitude to the fantasmic indicate the two worlds are now separated or at least that the spirits, neglected in the world of humans, no longer wish to coexist with humans in this highly industrialized world.

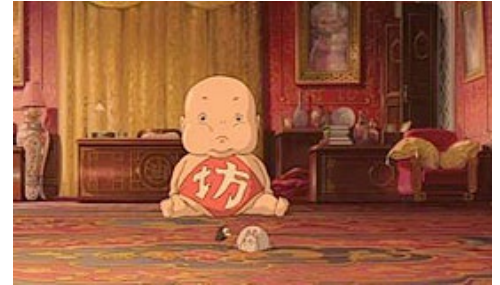
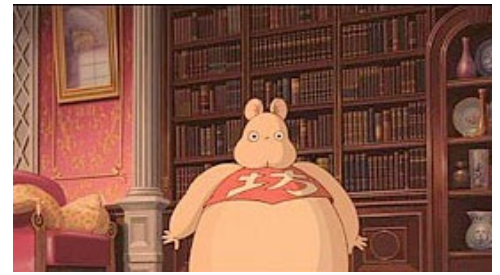
One of the origins of Shinto may have come in olden times when agriculture sustained human societies; people animated nature and believed that their care and respect for it pleased its spirits who protected the nation and provided prosperity. However, after the coming of Western industrialization, people's faith was no longer in nature but in a successful economy. Applying this kind of thinking to his own art, once, in an interview, Miyazaki decried contemporary post-industrial society as a system that watered down anime's expressive possibilities. Anime, according to Miyazaki, could well represent love and justice. However, as he put it,

"Our old enemy 'poverty' somehow disappeared, and we can no longer find an enemy to fight against" (Miyazaki, 1988).

In other words, after Japan's industrial success since the Meiji restoration in 1890s and recovery from WWII cast out poverty from the nation, people still remain possessed by an illusion of gaining a wealthy everyday life and continue living with a gap between their ideal and real life. As a result, an endless and unsatisfying cycle of production and consumption has begun destroying harmony among family and community (Harootunian, 2000). Zizek (1989) points out that people of late capitalism are well aware that money is not magical. To obtain it, it has to be replaced through labor, and after you use it, it will just disappear, as will as any other material. Allison (1996) adds to this point:

"They know money is no more than an image and yet engage in its economy where use-value has been increasingly replaced and displaced by images (one of the primary definitions of post-modernism) all the same" (p. xvi).

So, as Miyazaki puts it, the concerns of the late-capitalist Japan are now not for love and justice, but for money and pleasure.



Bo's transformation to a fat rat, and other Yubaba's henchmen to Bo.

The film represents such a shift of values through the character of Yubaba. The one thing she cares about besides earning money is her baby, Bo, who is the only one character who receives her motherly affection. However, she cares *more* about money than her own baby. In an important development in the plotline, Yubaba has a twin sister, Zeneba, and the two have been rivals with different views of life. One day Zeneba sneaks in to Yubaba's office to find the boy Haku who, under the command of Yubaba, stole a golden seal from Zeneba. Zeneba punishes Yubaba by transforming Bo into a fat rat and Yubaba's henchman into Bo. After Zeneba left, Haku confronts Yubaba, who is not yet aware of Zeneba's doings. In this scene, Yubaba sits in her bathrobe in front of the fireplace, admiring a pile of gold brought by the workers. Haku walks up to her and says, "You still haven't noticed that something precious to you has been replaced?" A close-up of Haku cuts in, then, a point-of-view shot of Haku looking directly at Yubaba's eyes, then Yubaba's eyes looking back to him. Wondering what he meant by "something precious," Yubaba takes a piece of gold to check if it is fake or not. She looks back into Haku's eyes, smiling slightly to indicate that he is wrong about the gold being replaced. A close-up of Haku cuts in again, his face appealing to her with strong emotion. Still Yubaba does not notice what he meant by precious. Only when the fake Bo makes a noise besides her, she notices that her replaced "precious" thing is her own baby. This sequence reveals the degree to which Yubaba, who has dedicated her life to managing the Yuya for profit, has lost her heart, her capacity to care for other living beings, including her own son. This scene strongly reinforces the theme that modernization has altered values and broken family ties.

In contrast to Yubaba, Zeneba is the only character aware of the vanity of money, pleasure, and materialism. When Haku is cursed by Zeneba, Chihiro visits Zeneba to ask if she can take the curse away from him. In contrast to the Yuya, which is a many storied building, Zeneba's house is a simple small home. In a plain room, unlike Yubaba's room, Zeneba lives by enjoying cooking, knitting, and other domestic skills. When Zeneba makes thread for sewing, she says, "I can do it by my magic, but it does not mean anything" (My translation: there is no English subtitle for this line). She says this after she made fun of her sister for being too greedy. Her words here indicate that the use of magic at the Yuya appears to be successful, fast to make a profit, yet costing the precious quality of humanity. In the film's symbolism, such magic is equated with machines that make mass-production possible in the contemporary world, so Zeneba's words and her whole characterization as a touchstone of value clearly



critique a fordist production system. In other words, even though it is possible and sometimes necessary to use machines, too much of it can destroy spiritual values in society.

## Identity confusion

Related to its presentation of the loss of spiritual values, the film elaborates an extensive critique of another contemporary global issue: identity confusion. A symptom of identity loss is seen in the way that cultures today encourage people to constantly refashion their self-image, so that individuals construct their identity based on ideals presented in popular media. More and more, people become unsatisfied with their lives because of the gap they see between their real life and the ideal luxurious life promoted within late capitalist economy, which needs more and faster consumption to make more profit. Because of the gap between the real and the fantasy, people in late capitalist society become ever more unsatisfied with themselves. Perhaps, that is one of the reasons why people are more and more attracted to anime, where transformation of identity are easily visually accomplished.



A cosplayer posing as an anime character.



Male cross-players.

To illustrate, we may name a few examples from a popular daily life phenomenon among anime fans, called “cosplay.” The word, cosplay, is the combination of costume + play (or role-play.) Namely, it is the practice among anime fans that involves wearing their favorite anime characters’ costumes to enjoy daily life while in the role of the character. Under the umbrella of cosplay, there is also a practice called “cross play.” In cross play, males wear female anime characters’ costume, and vice versa. As you might imagine, your body shape, gender, or age do not matter once you wear the costume because you are what the costume is. When you are cosplaying, your identity depends on what others know about the character, not on who you are. Cosplay, therefore, allows the players to change their identity. In other words, cosplay is about the interchange or transformation of identity across reality and fantasy. In this modern age when people are seeking to create and to own the latest products, a person’s identity becomes what the society produces and what they own. The products, after all, are produced for a mass audience, so that consumers become lost in the mass production of identity.

In *Spirited Away*, oblivion via loss of name is a major plot device; as the film's trailer emphasizes,

“Will Chihiro get back her name? Will she find her way back to the world of human?”

“Chihiro, a ten year-old girl who got her name taken away...begins to work in a town unlike any other.”

Miyazaki stresses the importance of having a proper name to warn us against the possibility of losing our identity in the post-modern world. When Chihiro first gets hired by Yubaba, Yubaba alters Chihiro’s name to Sen. Later Haku explains to Chihiro that Yubaba controls people by stealing their names. The plot operates on the premise that if Chihiro forgot her original name, she would forget about her past and never be able to go back to where she was from. This name change along with Chihiro's being forced to work in an assembly line type job in order to survive sets up the film's major theme: that entering into the capitalist system confuses people by changing what they identify themselves with. Before they identified themselves with who they were; but now they identify themselves with what they are in society according to what they own or produce. The film's plot echoes Marx's famous statement (1852),



Chihiro's full name written on her

employment contract. But parts of her name are stolen ...

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.” (181)



... by Yubaba's magical power.

In addition, in the way that the film references early capitalism of the Meiji era, Yubaba's taking away Chihiro's family name has several other goals; Yubaba intends to distinguish the ruling class from the commoners and second to take away Chihiro's dignity. In Japan, up until the beginning of Meiji era, people other than the ruling class were not allowed to publicly use their family name. When the feudal Edo system that recognized only the family name of samurai or ruling class began to fall, the new Meiji government allowed everyone of all classes to use their family name. Having the family name, hence, provides dignity to common individuals and their families. By showing her power to steal Chihiro's family name, Yubaba claims membership in the upper class; she humiliates Chihiro by demoting her from being a member of a family to a mere employee, now a slave to her employer.

Besides Chihiro and Haku, a key character representing identity confusion is No-Face, who has only a shadow-like body and a mask. The mask does not hide his face for he has no face; rather, the mask constructs his outside identity. Since the mask symbolizes a product that people can buy with money, here it indicates an unoriginal identity that people can construct by giving into materialism.



No-Face makes gold to tempt people, and...

No-Face appears to be the most greedy and uncontrollable of all the characters. He draws people to himself by producing gold and grows by eating them. When he eats those greedy men and women, he gains a pseudo-identity through them. Since his diet consists of greedy people, he just gets filled with more and more human greed, thus making him himself more and more greedy. As he gains his identity through materialist desire, he wants more material to satisfy himself. He eats up all the food at the Yuya, but still is never satisfied. No-Face represents capitalist production and consumption, a system that grows by feeding upon human greed. Finally he tries to eat Sen and rampages around the Yuya, crying, “I’m lonely, I’m lonely. I want Sen. I want Sen.” In the interview included in the DVD, producer Toshio Suzuki explains that No-Face wants to enter into somebody's heart to quench his loneliness. Yet only the method he thinks of is tempting others with false wealth. He can gain attention from almost everyone except Sen, whose heart seeks the most valuable thing, not gold or money. No-Face thus wants to have that heart after unsuccessfully trying to satisfy himself with other material. He follows Chihiro when she leaves the Yuya to go to Zeniba's house, and she knows that his problem has resided with his staying in the Yuya. In other words, she has learned that the problem is for one to stay in and be conformed to the capitalist system that continues feeding him/her a contentment based on delusion.



... it grows as it eats greedy people at the Yuya.

Both No-Face and Chihiro travel on a train to Zeniba's. Like No-Face, Miyazaki depicts all the passengers on the train as shadows. The difference is that they are not wearing a mask like No-Face. No-Face was eager to gain his identity through a product, but people outside the Yuya focus on a different goal. The train Chihiro and No-Face are on is the down train that takes them to the suburbs or rural areas. This train sequence produces a nostalgia of homecoming. Noises of preparing entertainments or of operating machines are not heard on the train. Rather people are getting further from the Yuya, the industrial metropolis. One shadow man takes two big traveling bags and exits; he does not look like a businessman carrying a small business case but may represent a man who finished his migrant work and is going to see his family. At a station, we see a mother and a little girl holding hands. This is in contrast to the Yuya, where the prominent relationships represented are those of co-





Chihiro and No-Face on the train.



A shadowy man on the train.



No-Face finally enjoys knitting at Zeniba's home.



Haku as a boy.

workers or employer/employees, not of family bonds. Outside of the Yuya, i.e. a capitalist mentality, exists a sense of home, however neglected in modern late capitalist generations. No-Face finally settles down at Zeniba's house where he can help Zeniba, who lives outside of a capitalist mentality. When Chihiro takes leave to go back to the Yuya from Zeniba's house, Zeniba gives her blessing to Chihiro, "Do not let go of your own name" (my translation). That is, do not let your identity conform to what a capitalist ideology would force it to be.

On her way back to the Yuya, Chihiro meets Haku, who has forgotten his true name. Their conversation reveals that Haku is actually a noble spirit of river dammed up to build a mansion. Before this scene, Kamajii mentioned that Haku came to the Yuya both because he had nowhere else to go and because he wanted to become Yubaba's apprentice to gain her magical power, which in the film is equated with her capital. Thus, as a character, Haku symbolizes the victim of industrialization who lost himself and tried to gain capital to survive. After a while at the Yuya, Haku forgot his name completely. Luckily, Chihiro, who once almost drowned in that river, remembers its name, and the moment she tells Haku his true name, he regains his true identity. After they arrive back at the Yuya, Chihiro successfully rescues her parents so now it is time for Chihiro to go back to the human world. For his farewell, Haku promises to quit being Yubaba's apprentice, since regaining his true identity made him realize the folly of working under the system of the Yuya, which took away his memories of his true self.

## Conclusion

In the very last scene, as Chihiro emerges from the spirits' world and is driving away with her parents, Disney added some English subtitles where there is no Japanese dialogue. The English subtitles go like this:

Chihiro's father: "A new house and a new school? It is a bit scary."  
Chihiro: "I think I can handle it."

If one were only to see this film with the English subtitles, it would be tempting to think this film mainly as a coming-of-age story. Moreover, other lines of dialogue omitted in the English subtitles function to add more layers to the film (some of them are mentioned in this essay with my translation). Yet, the main theme of the film remains a depiction of an evil that Miyazaki wants to destroy — the human greed that sustains a system of capitalist consumerism. Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* is a masterpiece in the way that it shows both the goodness of simplicity and the purity of the youthful heart, as well as the way it allegorizes the evils of Japanese post-modern social and human conditions. Miyazaki has said that he does not produce films to promote hope, and that determining what is evil does not solve everything (Kanae, 1997). Through Haku and Chihiro, Miyazaki tells us what we should keep in our hearts. Through the Yuya, we learn about the kind of social condition we are living. This film, therefore, is an allegory of Japanese contemporary society, but also a magic mirror that reflects global capitalist social conditions in a fantastical fashion. The world of Miyazaki anime is a fantasy, but is not free from the issues we face in society today. With his poetic imagination and keen acumen, he presents our world as shaped by his wish that we could face the problems of capitalistic societies without losing our





Haku in his dragon god form.

ethics and aspirations. He does so by letting a youthful character, who has not yet had her identity molded to mainstream society, question this society with cunning and high spirit.

[Go to Bibliography](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Bibliography

Allison, A. (2006). The Japan fad in global youth culture and millennial capitalism. In F. Lunning (Ed.), *Mechademia 1: Emerging worlds of anime and manga*. (pp.11-22). Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press.

Benjamin, W. (1936). The storyteller: Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov. Retrieved February 21, 2008 from [http://www.slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF\\_1331-Benjamin.pdf](http://www.slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf)

Cavallaro, D. (2006). *The anime art of Hayao Miyazaki*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.

Harootunian, H. (2000). *Overcome by modernity: History, culture, and community in interwar Japan*. NJ: Princeton University Press.

Interview, Yasuyoshi Tokuma – Disney alliance. (1996, August 30th). *Nikkei Sangyo Shimbun*. Retrieved March 9, 2008 from The Hayao Miyazaki web, <http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/disney/media-coverage2.html#1>

Iwabuchi, K. (2001). *Toransu nashionaru Japan*. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.

----- (2002). *Reentering globalization: Popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*. London: Duke University Press.

Kanae, S. (1997, May 9th). [Interview with Hayao Miyazaki]. *Tech Win10gatsu bessatsu go/video doo!*, Vol.1.

Karrfalt, W. (1997, April 8th). Disney offers Japan ani vids for sell-through. *The Hayao Miyazaki Web* Retrieved March 9, 2008 from <http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/disney/media-coverage2.html#5>

Kitano, K. (2005). *Nihoneiga wa Amerikade doumiraretekitaka*. Tokyo. Heibonsha.

Looser, T. (2006). Superflat and the layers of image and history in 1990s Japan. In F. Lunning (Ed.) *Mechademia Vol.1*. (pp. 92-108). London: University of Minnesota Press.

Marx, K. (1852). The 18th Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte. *Marx/Engels Internet Archive*. Retrieved October 18, 2007 from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>

Miyazaki, H. (1988). About Japanese animation. In *Course Japanese movies 7 – The current situation of Japanese movies*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.  
Translated online by R. Toyama,  
<http://nausicaa.net/miyazaki/interviews/aboutanime.html>.

Murakami, T. (2000). *Superflat*. Tokyo: Madara Shuppan.

Tokuma, Y. (Producer), & Miyazaki, H. (Writer/Director). (2001). *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* [Motion picture]. Japan: Studio Ghibli.

Underwood, A. C. (1934). *Shintoism: the indigenous religion of Japan*. London: The Epworth Press.

Zizek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. London: Verso.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).





Demonstrations supporting and protesting polygamy, especially in the cases of Abdullah Gymnastiar and the Polygamy Award



K.H. Abdullah Gymnastiar and his two wives at a press conference related to his second marriage

## The curious cases of Salma, Siti, and Ming: representations of Indonesia's polygamous life in *Love for Share*

by [Ekky Imanjaya](#)

Even in Indonesia, the country with the biggest Muslim population (around 182.5-195 million, that is 88% of Indonesian citizens), the concept of “polygamy” always becomes controversial when publicly discussed; it provokes pro and contra debates, even demonstrations among Indonesian scholars, leaders, and communities.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] For example, in 2006, K.H. Abdullah Gymnastiar was one of the most popular Islamic leaders, the head of Pesantren Daarul Tauhid (an Islamic boarding school) in Bandung, and the owner and head of many companies such as a publishing company, a radio station, a local television station, and a training center. When he married for the second time, it disappointed many Muslims, especially women. People wondered, “Why would a preacher who promotes the concept of *Keluarga Sakinah* (peaceful family) enter into a second marriage with a beautiful woman for no other important or urgent purpose?” One by one his companies went bankrupt. Many of his followers (*jamaah*) left him, and almost nobody wanted to see him on national television or invite him to various important Islamic feasts and events.[2]

On the other hand, as a pro-polygamy statement, there is an interesting event called “Polygamy Award.” In July 2003 Puspo Wardoyo, a restaurants owner with four wives, first put on the event. His idea behind such a ceremony is to bring polygamy and its practitioners out of the closet, so to speak, and to celebrate polygamy's virtue as a respected Islamic tradition that should be a source of pride rather than shame for both men and women. Some members of Indonesian women's right organizations, including some with an Islamic orientation protested against the award. Around 850 protestors showed up at the hotel where the award ceremony was held. Pro and contra discussions on television and in newspapers and magazines occurred before and after the event (Brenner: 2006, 164-165). For Wardoyo — the jovial president of the Indonesian Polygamy Society (*Masyarakat Poligami Indonesia*) — polygamy serves as a means of combating such evils as prostitution and adultery and proves to be an excellent way for financially secure men like himself to spread their wealth around so that more women can enjoy comfortable lives (Suryono 2003 in Brenner: 2006, 166):

"God had endowed men with greater sexual desires than women, he asserted (as did many others who supported polygamy), and multiple marriages were the only legitimate way to channel those desires." (Brenner: 2006, 164).

In a magazine interview related to the award, Wardoyo continues his philosophy:



Puspo Wardoyo, the man behind the Polygamy Award, and his four wives



ACover of *Berbagi Suami / Love for Share* DVD for Malaysian market. The term "Pawagam" (Panggung, Wayang dan Gambar, Stage-Shadow-Image) is a Malay term for cinema. The film's international distributor is [Red Films](#).

"A man who can afford it financially and who is of good character has the duty to have more than one wife. Polygamy is the most praiseworthy of actions ... I want to spread the polygamy virus."  
(Brenner: 2006, 164)

The concept of polygamy, indeed, is one of Islam's teachings. The verses are so clear about it, and the Muslim scripture, the *Quran*, place strict restrictions upon its practice:

"... marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them, then only one."  
(*Quran*, Annisa: 3)[3]

However, another verse in the same chapter warns: "(You) will never be able to be fair and just among your women, even if it is your ardent desire..."; and this 129th verse should be highlighted for those men who want to undertake a second, third, or fourth marriage. Within Islam, there are some interpretations regarding the term "able to deal justly with them." Indonesia's recent Religious Affairs Minister Maftuh Basyuni underlines that Islam promotes monogamy in marriage, with polygamy neither a responsibility for Muslims nor a basic right:

"Islam is basically monogamous in nature, but in some limited and rare conditions polygamy is tolerated."[4]

Even the industrialist mentioned above, Aa' Gym (Big Brother Gym, nickname for Gymnastiar) stated in a press conference about his second marriage:

"Polygamy is clearly allowed by God, but it is not recommended. Polygamy can be used in certain moments as an emergency exit."[5]

How about the status of the wives? That is stated in a web site for Islamic thought:

"The Muslim is not permitted to differentiate between his wives in regards to sustenance and expenditures, time, and other obligations of husbands. Islam does not allow a man to marry another woman if he will not be fair in his treatment. Prophet Muhammad forbade discrimination between the wives or between their children. Also, marriage and polygamy in Islam is a matter of mutual consent. No one can force a woman to marry a married man. Islam simply permits polygamy; it neither forces nor requires it. Besides, a woman may stipulate that her husband must not marry any other woman as a second wife in her prenuptial contract."[6]

Marshall Clark writes that most Indonesian women, including many Muslim women who recognize that polygamy is sanctioned in the *Quran*, strongly disagree with the idea. On the other hand, some women support it, even if they are deeply unhappy that their own husband has taken a second or third wife. (Clark: 2008, 39). According to Blackburn,

"For some Islamic conservatives, polygamy is something to be proud of, the badge of a devout Muslim" (Blackburn 2004: 134).

Various discourses around polygamy could never be openly discussed in Suharto's New Order government era (1966-1998). In May 1998, the Reformation movement led to the downfall of the Suharto dictatorship era[7] and people began to experience more freedom of speech and expression. As





In 2006 Dinata produced *Perempuan Punya Cerita* (*Chants of the Lotus*), an omnibus project directed by four women, including Dinata. This film and a documentary called *Pertaruhan* (*At Stake*, 2008) indicate that Dinata continues to speak up on gender issues.



In the DVD's special features is a documentary called *Polygamy Phenomenon*. There, Puspo Wardoyo is also interviewed.

Brenner describes the influence of this moment on contemporary discussions of polygamy,

"Ironically, it was Indonesia's transition toward democracy after the fall of the Suharto regime that made it possible for the ever-smiling restaurateur [Puspo Wardoyo] to take his campaign to the Indonesian public." (Brenner: 2006, 165)

In the New Order regime, monogamy was forced on people as legalizing one and only marriage. For example, the 1974 Marriage Law makes monogamy the official norm, facilitates divorce for women and makes it more difficult for men, and stipulates a minimum age for marriage. (Blackburn: 2004, 222). That law, strongly opposed by some Islamic factions, imposed restrictions on polygamy (including a requirement that a would-be polygamist obtain permission from the first wife before marrying again) and declared monogamy as the foundation of Indonesian marriages (Brenner: 2006, 165).

In 1983, one important regulation was added: it required civil service employees including high-ranking officials to seek permission from their superiors as well as their wives if they wanted a polygamous marriage or a divorce. (Blackburn: 2004, 133; Brenner: 2006, 165-166). Under the 1983 regulations, polygamy was permitted only under limited circumstances, such as the inability of the first wife to bear children. In short, the Suharto government made it difficult to engage in polygamy (Brenner: 2006, 166).

In the Reformation era, polygamy — a risky and taboo issue — re-occurs as a fact of social life. For example, President Megawati, the daughter of a polygamous first President and herself the President of Republic of Indonesia from 2001-2004, turned a blind eye to concerns about polygamy. In fact, her Vice-President, Hamzah Haz, leader of an Islamic party, has three wives although the 1974 marriage law has remained in effect and Haz took his third wife while still in the office. (Brenner: 2006, 166). This kind of *de facto* openness in politicians' behavior attests to the state's current lack of interest in the issue. In response, many women's organizations fear this public tolerance has allowed polygamy to gain ground. That some men openly flaunt their polygamous status and claim it as evidence of their Islamic identity has alarmed many women (*Jakarta Post*, 30 July 2003, in Blackburn: 2004, 136).



Voices against polygamy include



... and Tommy F. Awuy, feminist and



Musdah Muslia, an Islamic scholar from the Liberal Islam Network...

philosopher.



Scholars who give professional opinions include Dr. Boyke Dian Nugraha, sexologist, and...



... Yati Lubis, psychologist and ex Dean of the Faculty of Psychology, University of Indonesia .



Sitoresmi is interviewed, representing a woman who practices polygamy.

Currently there are constant pros and cons expressed on the issue, as I already elaborated earlier in the cases of Puspo Wardoyo and Abdullah Gymnastiar. However, there are some Muslim women's organizations, while unwilling to speak out against the institution of polygamy, who wish to see what they considered "abuses" of polygamy eradicated to protect women. (Blackburn: 2004, 111-112). There are also some prominent Islamic reformers, who now take the line that polygamy was something suited to the Prophet's time but is no longer necessary today.

I am particularly interested in how Indonesian cinema can now portray polygamous life. *Berbagi Suami* (literally *Husband for Share* with an official international title as *Love for Share*), directed by Nia Dinata, 2004, is a post-New-Order Indonesian film that explores various aspects of polygamy from the wives' point of view within its comic plot. The script presents three different stories about three different situations and does so in a sort of black comedy or satiric way. The DVD also has a documentary about the issues that are raised in the fictions.

Dinata tries to depict the phenomenon of polygamous life. In *Polygamy Phenomenon*, the DVD documentary, she states:

"I just want to communicate with an audience, with people, and give them a slice of life. I don't want to make propaganda for or against polygamy."

She did two years research first about why women might accept a polygamous lifestyle. She concludes:

"They have their own personal reasons for why they practice polygamy, with reasons that we can't understand unless we experience it ourselves."



Nia Dinata, while directing the film.

She finally developed three stories from three different illustrative examples. First is an educated Muslim woman, with religious motives. Second is a naïve but forward-thinking village girl with a sex-obsessed husband who brings her to live with his two wives in the city. Third is an urban Chinese teenager who works as a waitress and becomes her boss' mistress so as to find a shortcut to fulfill her

wish, to become an actress. These characters — Salma, Siti, and Ming — represent salient models of the practice of polygamy that Dinata found in her research.



In the first episode, the politician Abah has a stroke, and all his three wives gather. Second wife, Indri, tries to compete with first wife, Salma, by managing everything, including providing a traditional/alternative shaman for Abah in Salma's house without permission.



The third episode offers another approach to polygamy in this comedy of manners. In public space, Koh Abun and Cik Linda seem to be a great couple. For Abun, Linda is his good luck charm, and for Linda, Abun is the only man who does not seem to have a crush on Ming. But the lovers Ming and Koh Abun have other plans.

Although she works in a comic mode, Dinata says she wants to put a slice of life in her movie, which in some ways could be called striving toward realism. If we want to understand what that "realism" might mean for her, we might well look at how an older film critic, Roy Armes, classified three major cinematic approaches to reality —uncovering the real, imitating the real, and questioning the real. He writes:

"From the first of these stems the evolution of a realist aesthetic and a whole tradition of works in which the aim is quite simply to show the world as it is. The artist's prime concern is not to invent or to imagine, but to place people, objects, setting, and experiences as directly as possible in front of the camera and to make the audience see. The second tradition — which is almost as old as the first — discards this direct link with reality and fastens instead on the film's power to offer a resemblance or imitation of life. The resemblance is used not as an end in itself but as a means of creating satisfying fictions. It is the cinema's role as the universal storyteller that gave rise to Hollywood and prompted the growth of a world-wide entertainment industry. Since the prime purpose of the cinema is seen here to be the narrative function, reality in an unmediated form is an irrelevance. Verisimilitude is more relevant than realism, but the power of the medium to sustain an illusion is more important than either" (Armes 1974: 10-11).

In my opinion, the third approach, "the questioning of the real," is what Dinata wants to portray to explore an inner reality beneath the surface. Armes expands on this aspect:

The third, and perhaps least-developed, tradition is that of using film not to convey surface reality or to sustain a make-believe but to explore an inner reality beneath the surface. This means using the dreamlike aspects of the film experience — the darkened room and the bright hypnotic images — in a way which reduces objects and people to mere ciphers deprived of independent existence. Theoretically at least, from this point of view, the cinema is a most exciting medium for the expression of modernist ideas: creating its own space-time continuum, mixing the real and the fictional, objective narration and subjective viewpoint, and building up a multiple perspective in the manner of a cubist painting" (Armes 1974: 10-11).

Although visually *Love for Share* is not modernist in a "dreamlike" way, it does both present an illusion of reality and explore an inner reality. Therefore, as I use the term realism in this paper I consider both aims, how the film explores its characters' inner reality and how it depicts aspects of social reality.

Although polygamy is a very sensitive and controversial issue, Indonesian spectators have enthusiastically received the film. And it has had broad critical acclaim. The film won several awards in Indonesia, including at the 2006 Indonesian Film Festival (Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Film), 2006 Bandung Film Forum (Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Art Director, Best Actress), and Best Movie at MTV Indonesia Movie Awards 2006.



Sometimes the characters from the three different stories meet. For example, Abah is a loyal customer of Abun's restaurant. In this scene, Ming meets Abah and his second wife ...



...a minute after she'd served Salma, Abah's first wife.

And, interestingly, the film was Indonesia's submission for the 2006 Best Foreign Language Film for the Academy Awards.[8]

In my opinion, the film's acceptance may be due to the following reasons. First, Dinata says she had no intention to judge or take sides and get trapped into pro-contra debates. Second, she uses a comedy of manners approach. This subgenre satirizes the manners and affectations of a social class, often represented by stock characters, who enact a comic plot often concerned with an illicit love affair or some other scandal.[9] This kind of film concerns social mores and the question of whether or not characters meet certain social standards, and often the governing social standard is morally trivial but exacting.[10] By using such a traditional comic structure, she can incorporate dilemmas and social situations that seem both safely outside people's lives yet strikingly familiar. That is why I can say the film incorporates elements of both genre comedy and realism.

## On *Love for Share*

When the jury of 34th International Independent Film Festival Brussels announced Nia Dinata as the best director, everybody at Grand Salle Centre Culturel remained silent. They did not recognize the name. But when the title of the film was mentioned, the people applauded. The President of Jury, Dan Cukier, said that Dinata was successful in introducing a local yet universal issue. [11] The year after, the Festival put on a program focusing on Indonesian Cinema.

*Love for Share* is Nia Dinata's third film. In the Post-New-Order cinema scene in Indonesia, she is a well-known director and producer who consistently deals with gender issues in films such as *Ca Bau Kan* (2001, *The Courtesan*) and *Arisan* (2003, *The Gathering*). She is also the producer of *Perempuan Punya Cerita* (2007, translated as *Women's Stories*, with the commercial title of *Lotus of Chants*), an omnibus project directed by four female directors including herself. As producer, she has produced films such as *Janji Joni* (*Joni's Promise*, 2005, dir. Joko Anwar) and the sex-comedy *Quickie Express* (2007, dir. Dimas Djayadinigrat). In 2008, she produced *Pertaruhan* (*At Stake*, 2009) an omnibus documentary on gender issues. Recently, a distributor has launched *The Nia Dinata DVD collection*, the first Indonesian director's boxed set, which consists of four films directed by Dinata.

*Love for Share* honestly describes a sensitive and controversial theme among Indonesian people, something considered a public secret: how families conduct a polygamous life. Actually, many people in Indonesia don't really know about daily life for those living in a polygamous family (Badalu & Kusumaningrum: 2006, p 41). And Dinata's film, through the style of a comedy of manners, looks at the problem from women's perspective, the main female characters. For that reason, her script pointedly uses as a key element the voice off and voice over of the main women characters.

Dinata uses multiple-plot storytelling, just like Alejandro Gonz  les I  nrritu in *Amores Perros*, *24 Grams*, and *Babel*. *Love for Share* consists of three stories of three women, from three different backgrounds (cultural, religious, racial, social class, etc). Each of them has the same problem, which is to share their husbands' love and attention with (several) other women. The film represents their troubles and internal conflicts. During the course of the film, these women find answers to their problems and sometimes even meet each other, without





*Arisan! (The Gathering)* is Dinata's first film to achieve both commercial and critical success.



*Arisan! (The Gathering)* presents stories of middle-class working women and a gay man who's coming out.

realizing that they share a similar problem. Their stories are told as separate but are united by the theme and the women's attitude of both acceptance and rebellion, since all three have a rebellious spirit against their husbands. These stories are also united by reference to the tsunami disaster of December 2004.

First is Salma, a Muslim gynecologist, who stoically suffers as her famous husband (a religious leader, successful businessman, and political leader as well) collects two additional wives, but she eventually manages to achieve a state of bemused resignation about it all. The second story traces the life of Siti, a village girl, brought by her uncle to take courses and study hairdressing in Jakarta. Her uncle is a poor film-crew driver who supports two wives and a covey of kids who are all living together in a poor two-room house. And then she becomes his third wife, as the other wives predicted from when they first saw her. All wives get along together well under one roof although two of them finally escape to live on their own as a lesbian couple. The third story is about Ming, who soon becomes the mistress of her boss, a Chinese Catholic who owns a famous restaurant.

The three female main characters meet each other almost unintentionally. Salma and family are a loyal customer of Koh Abun's (Ming's husband's) roasted-duck restaurant. Siti takes her fellow wife to a clinic owned by Salma. Siti and Dwi take the taxi that previously was taken by Ming, as they meet outside the house in a poor, dirty street. All women experience the same problem, polygamy, without knowing each other's situation. They are also interwoven by the theme of the tsunami in Aceh in 2004. Salma and Siti watch it on television. In the first plot episode, Salma lets her son, Nadim, to go there as a volunteer. Before her husband got a stroke, he and Salma were planning to go and help the victims. In the second plot episode, Siti's husband went to Aceh as a driver for an international documentary company, and later he brings a girl from Aceh as his fourth wife. And in the third episode, Ming talks about this disaster and wants to donate to relief efforts there.[12]



The 2004 tsunami disaster connects the characters in *Love for Share*. A TV talkshow with Salma as a speaker is interrupted for a live report. Abah suddenly arranges for his political team and even a Hercules plane to visit the disaster area for political ends. Nadim watches TV news

about the tsunami, and he wonders why politicians and celebrities, particularly his father, go to Aceh just to promote their own purposes, have press conferences, take pictures, and go home. But, before going there in person, Abah gets a stroke. In the hospital elevator Nadim and Salma meet Indri. They wonder who this wife is that Abah planned to travel with — since Salma had rejected Abah's invitation, and Indri was not asked by Abah to accompany him. Nadim finally goes to Aceh in person to volunteer to help the people in need.



Pak Lik and all his wives, including Siti, watch TV news about the Aceh tsunami. Soon, Pak Lik is hired by an international documentary crew to help film the aftermath of the disaster. When he returns, he brings back Santi from Meulaboh as his fourth wife.

Ming talks to Koh Abun about the event and wants to donate some money. Abun, reading the news from a Chinese newspaper, suggests how she might pick a responsible, trustworthy organization for her donation.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Window onto polygamous life



Interestingly, characters from different episodes meet in passing but never know they share the same problem. Abah, Salma, and Indri are loyal costumer of Koh Abun's restaurant. Siti and Pak Lik meet Linda in a narrow alley in the neighborhood.



Ming gives her teddy bear (the doll that Koh Abun ties a wedding ring to in order to propose to her) to Indri's little daughter.

For Indonesian spectators, the film becomes a representation about themselves. If they laugh, they actually laugh at themselves. They can see their own daily life, that of their family, their neighbors, and friends through this film. They are closely related to people who accept and reject polygamy; thus the film moves their emotions.



Siti takes Sri, the first wife, to get birth control. Their doctor is Salma, who has a small clinic for women. They find out that Sri is infected by a "dirty disease" from Pak Lik. Later she finds she and Dwi also have contracted the same venereal disease.



Ming, at the end, moves out of the luxurious apartment Koh Abun gave her, and goes by taxi to a slum area. When Ming gets out of the taxi, the very same car is taken by Siti and Dwi, who are escaping to freedom and a life together.

Indonesian films have an unique perspective, history, and point of view. Hence, to explain the impact of this one film, to place it in context, it is worth looking back on some of the trajectory of Indonesian cinema. One of the important writers in this regard is Salim Said, author of a milestone book, *Shadows on the Silver Screen: A Social History of Indonesian Film*.

Salim Said discusses the problems audiences have had with nationally produced feature films:

"Moviegoers have complained vociferously about the stories as well as the presentation of Indonesian movies. By combining the gist of the various complaints and criticism, a general description of contemporary Indonesian movies emerges ... Considering that the films' basic formula is mostly obtained from foreign movies, 'an Indonesian face' is obviously missing. That is why it is often difficult to accept the appearance of the actors and actresses playing Indonesian personalities. They seem wooden and unconvincing." (Said: 1991, p 3)

Said emphasizes two motivations for filmmaking in Indonesia. The first is geared to commercial gain. And the second is seen in groups motivated by a desire for self-expression who try to portray problems faced by their respective groups. Usmar Ismail, "Father of Indonesian Film," said that his third film, *Darah dan Doa (Long March)*, was the first Indonesian film because "for the first time, a film is done all by Indonesian people, in creative-technique perspective or financial way. And, for the first time, an Indonesian film talked about a national





Salma meets Indri, her “competitor” for the first time in public space at her own event, the initiation of Salma Residences, owned by her husband! A sudden electrical blackout makes Indri’s little daughter cry out for her Abah (dad).



Siti meets Pak Lik's first and second wives the first day she arrives in Jakarta from her village (Ambarawa, in central Java). They already know that Siti is going to be the third wife, but Siti does not have any idea since she's come there to enroll in beauty school. Siti only fully realizes the situation three months later.



Ming, as Koh Abun's secret wife, meets Cik Linda (and her daughters) in an uncomfortable situation. They angrily invade her house and yell at

problem.” [13] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Dinata is one of these few people who try to give expression to the problems of a group. She tries to show a film by a woman to women, a film that is about women. Her goal has been an idealistic one, to depict social “realities.” It is then interesting to consider how the film becomes a window into polygamous life and the encapsulation of the lives of three typical women characters. I will apply two concepts from Said.

Said noted that Indonesian film industry has a lack of cultural identity that portrays the problems and social life of the Indonesian people. Yet he has hope:

“Even though Usmar Ismail is dead, the dream of making films that deal with Indonesian problems and issues has not yet completely died in the hearts of other filmmakers. To realize that dream, however, will be an uphill fight because the producers of Indonesian films, whether ‘indigenous’ or ‘non indigenous,’ are businessmen who are accustomed to view film only in terms of the potential for commercial gain” (Said: 1991, p 121).

Thus one of the foundations of Dinata's success is that fortunately she has had great producers and shares an idealistic dream with them. She herself has also played a role as producer in some films made by her company, Kalyana Shira Films. So she knows exactly what might be a producer’s point of view.

In doing research about polygamy for two years in order to make her script closer to reality, she first wrote newspaper articles and books on this issue, summarizing all of the pro and contra positions. But Dinata wrote the script from a more personal position, since the experience of doing the interviews made a deep impression on her:

“I also felt the war inside the women’s hearts who had and still do experience the polygamous life of their husbands. Hence, I decided to make three female characters as central characters in this scenario”[14]

Dinata really tries to show a multifaceted depiction of the polygamous reality in Indonesia, which has not only one face — its religious/Islamic purpose — but also another — its impact on real people's lives. Therefore, she developed three characters with three stories. The script is united by the women's inner drive; for even if these three women have different social, economical, and ethnical backgrounds, they have one goal, which is to search for happiness within big city life in Jakarta. And, in the process of searching, they have to live out a daily life within polygamy — which turns out to be three different ways of encountering polygamy, varying according to each character.

As I mentioned earlier, Dinata doesn’t take sides about the subject of polygamy. She just gives the unseen realities. What we see seem like real people, not stereotypes, and their actions rarely conform to our expectations. There are no bad guys in the film. [15] The script just throws out issues about patriarchal society, ones that only a few people take time to articulate and understand.

## Salma's story

her. She passes out.

The old, sick, paralyzed father tries to communicate with his son. For weeks, he can't speak nor move his body's left side body and just lies in bed. And for the first time, since he got a stroke. Haji Imron, the father, talks to his son Nadim, who takes care of him.

- "Dim, later when you marry, promise, only one wife"
- "I can't believe your first words are about that," replies Nadim.
- "Nadim, it's a terrible mess. Just one...Please?"
- "Alright. Don't worry. I don't even have a candidate yet," Nadim answers his father.



In the first episode, Nadim, no matter how cynically and critically he thinks about his father, cares for Abah in a devoted and caring way until Abah's death. And the father's last words warm the son's heart.

When Abah gets a stroke, Salma finds out that Abah's taken another wife. Nadim satirically comments, "Finally, Abah's wish to gather all of his wives together is fulfilled."



But as first wife, Salma realizes she should open her heart to accept this fact and open her house to all her "competitors" as Abah goes home from the hospital.

Those are the last words of Haji Imron who later dies because of a consequent heart attack. This scene continues with the voice off of Salma, Haji Imron's first wife.

"There is no trace of anger left in Nadim's face. His dad left him the most important advice before he died, words that Nadim had longed to hear from his father."

This scene is near the closing scene of episode one, Salma's story, which depicts the case of most Indonesian people who live in polygamy, that is, it's based on the practice's religious foundation. In the script, Abah (the father, Haji Imron), marries for the second time, which he says is for the religious purpose of avoiding adultery. And as a rich national leader and religious man, he can afford to have more than one wife. Salma, finally, accepts such a polygamous life for some reasons of her own. First for her is her religion and the Islamic reason. She even defends her decision and way of life publicly on a television talk show (a very important event for her husband Abah's political career. "My life runs well. I just go back to my religion and life as a devoted Muslimah," she says. The second reason she does this, and in a public way, is to maintain her reputation as a professional as well as her husband and family's name in society.

In the beginning, however, she avoids any interaction with the second wife (later on she learns that Abah has a third wife) until Abah gets sick and all of the wives gather in her house. "I am still learning to open this house's door sincerely [to the other wives], and also to open my soul and heart."

The other important character is Nadim, the son, who has become cynical about his dad. Nadim provides the other reason for Salma to accept polygamy, so she can devote her spirit to her life as a mother and to poor people as a doctor and owner of a little clinic. Abah's death becomes the way out for her. She has remained a wife for the rest of her husband's life, and finally her patience pays



At Abah's funeral ceremony, Salma finds out that Abah had a fourth wife.

But...



...as Nadim tells her: "If you are not surprised, neither am I."



When Abah dies and Nadim goes to Aceh, Salma feels fulfilled as a woman, independent of any male character.



As the second episode opens, the mise en scene depicts the poor area where Pak Lik lives.

off.

It is worth looking more closely at the practice of marriage as depicted in Salma's story. Salma does not know about her husband's other wives until she finds out with her own eyes at a public event. How can this happen? Indonesian law has no provision for non-religious civil marriage. Thus, a *religious* marriage ceremony is a legal requirement in Indonesia. To conclude a religious marriage ceremony, both prospective spouses must be of the same religion. If the fiancée is Muslim, the ceremony is held at the local *Kantor Urusan Agama* (KUA, the Office of Religious Affairs) that issues a Marriage Book, which becomes the legal evidence of a valid marriage. And a Muslim marriage ceremony does not need to be registered with the local Civil Registry Office.[16] Thus, a couple is legally married when they get married just in an Islamic way.

However, there is also another kind of marriage, called *secret marriage practices* (an Islamic term is *nikah siri*, not registered in KUA). It is legal before Muslim or Shariah law, or the couple could get married in another KUA. As long as the requirements are fulfilled, approval from his previous wife/wives is excluded from this regulation according to Islamic law. Abah's second (and also third and fourth) marriage is closer to the latter practice. Since he is a religious leader, he can keep the marriage secret for a long time. Only later does his second wife appear with both him and Salma in the same public space. Since he is wealthy, he can easily go to a KUA office very far from his first wife's residence and fulfill all the requirements, and also he has the money to rent his new wife a new house.

In many ways, Salma is a devoted muslimah; on the other hand, she rebels as a wife and lover. She should accept polygamy as a concept. But her heart rejects it. In public space, she defends her husband and polygamy but actually she enacts a quiet rebellion.

Salma always shows her true feelings when she is at home with her husband. She speaks her mind. "Is there anything wrong with me?" Salma cries out at the first time she finds out the truth. But she can't do anything to change it. Even with her son, she always gives him excuses to validate the fact that she has another "competitor." "It's our fate," she says.

In public space, even when she has lunch with friends, she offers a fake smile. When she appears on a famous talk show on public television, taking up the theme of polygamy, she defends her family. Her and her husband's dignity and the family's reputation are the most important thing and must be protected from gossip. Since Nadim is the reason she stays strong to live this kind of life, at the end she feels relieved as she lets her son go to Aceh as a volunteer to help tsunami victims:

"I let Nadim fly free as a volunteer. And be liberated from all of absurdity of his past."

## Siti's story

With the second story, we can look inside a representation of polygamous life among poor people; in addition, in this episode, sex is the main purpose for polygamy. Siti comes from a poor family in a rural slum area to live with Pak Lik (the uncle, a distant relative) and his two wives under the same roof. Pak Lik then adds another fourth wife just for the sake of sex. Later on, we find out that he must also have gone to prostitutes for he has contaminated his wives with a venereal disease. Amazingly, the wives live together happily in one house and act as each other's sisters. This phenomenon compares to Sitoresmi's statement (on polygamy practitioners) in the DVD documentary: women manage their hearts and minds and keep from jealousy through empathy towards the other wives.





Even Dwi and Siti think it weird that the wives are living under the same roof.



In fact, the children already know that they live in a polygamous family. They chat with the mothers, since they all sleep and live in the same room.



Sri's children call Dwi "Ibu Dwi" (mommy Dwi), and later call Siti as Ibu Siti (mommy Siti). The children draw pictures of the mothers.

When Siti comes to the house, both wives of Pak Lik have already known and understood that she will become the third wife although she does not see that. And they seem happy because Siti is considerate and a good, kind, and helpful girl. Three months later, she realizes that Pak Lik wants to marry her. Since she is totally dependent on her uncle, she accepts his proposal. She just doesn't feel comfortable refusing such a proposal because the man and his wives are very kind to her. But she doesn't enjoy her life, not even the sexual part. Siti escapes this problem by loving (and being loved by) Dwi, the second wife. Suddenly she realizes that she is happy and doesn't want to be under anyone's shadow or anyone's burden. Thus, with her lesbian lover, she plans to run away. Early in the morning, with Dwi's daughters, they flee to find a rented house far away from there, but they remain the wives of the same husband.



It is only Siti who feels uncomfortable while Pak Lik proposes to her openly in front of the other wives. Ironically the wives suggest she accept the proposal since they already know Siti is a good, diligent and helpful young woman within the family.

This story represents the open polygamous life, like Puspo Wardoyo celebrates, but for different purposes. Pak Lik marries Siti (and also, I believe, all of his wives) with an open but modest religious marriage ceremony — there, the second wife even accompanies Siti and helps her to wipe away her tears. There is no problem for the man to do that since the other two wives agree with the marriage. But, interestingly, in contrast with Salma's husband who is an Islamic cleric who aspires to noble activities, Siti's husband is a man who thinks that sex is the essence of life and seems to abandon Islamic teachings except for getting his religious, veiled, Aceh girl as fourth wife. In addition Pak Lik has been fooling around outside of marriage and brought back a venereal disease into the household, a kind of disregard that precipitates Siti's departure.

Does Siti have the spirit to rebel against her situation? As the youngest wife, Siti seems helpful and kind to the entire family — the husband, two wives, and the children. First she just wants to go to the big city to study at a beauty school. But her uncle marries her and that was his original intention. She lives in a peaceful life with this husband and the other two (later, three) wives.

Actually, in psychological terms, she doesn't like the husband-wife relationship. On her wedding night, when she is supposed to make love for the first time with this official husband, in voice over Siti says: "Tonight is the scariest night in my life." She is just being nice and obedient and does this duty as a wife and family member. She remains the kind, cheerful, and helpful Siti. With a smile on her face, she does the household chores, takes care of all the children pleasantly, and gladly gives her "bedtime" schedule to the oldest wife, who loves to have sex with their husband. In daily life, Siti pretends that nothing's happened and everything is running well.

But really she searches for love, not just sex and desire, but a gentle and warm love. And she finds such love with Dwi, the second wife. This strange feeling becomes stronger when Dwi asks Siti to join her in bed with the husband. After



In the wedding ceremony, the wives accompany her. Dwi wipes Siti's tears.



The wives even support Siti when she faces the wedding night.

that, in her relation with Dwi, Siti feels pure happiness, which becomes the motive for them to leave the family and search for freedom. In voice over she says:

“I never felt so much joy in my life. No matter how many chores and laundry I have to do, I cherish my days because of sister Dwi. Every chance we got, we’d sneak into the bathroom, our place of salvation, where we release all emotions that have been repressed.”

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Ming's story



Koh Abun and Cik Linda, the owner and manager of the restaurant, are a nice couple. Abun feels that Linda brings good luck to the restaurant, but sexually he's drawn to Ming, the restaurant's prima donna.

Ming's story deals with so-called secret polygamy, and interestingly it comes from a minority race and religion in Indonesia. Ming is Chinese. Koh Abun, a Catholic Chinese and her boss, loves her, and actually she falls in love with him too. But, she doesn't want to be blinded by love.

Koh Abun has a wife who becomes the manager of the restaurant and runs everything. And he considers his wife, like his Chinese faith, as a good luck charm. So he can't divorce her. And since he is a Catholic, he didn't dare to tell his wife about the relation so he marries Ming quietly. Ming accepts the proposal. She is tired of being poor. She wants to share in the wealth of Koh Abun. Thus she asks him for a new apartment and a new car.

In the end, when the first wife learns about their marriage, she commands Koh Abun to sell the car and new apartment. Koh Abun then gets a green card and moves to United States. The conditions of her life have strengthened Ming to follow her vocation of becoming an actress. She feels very happy because she is on her own now.



Ming asks Koh Abun for an apartment and car as a dowry and sees him as her exit from poverty. For her the purpose of marriage is financial.



In a way, she also uses Firman, a young director-wannabe, to fulfill her goal of becoming a popular actress.

As a young ambitious girl, Ming dreams of famous actresses like Zhang Ziyi. And she knows that working as a waitress is not the path for her, so she decides to accept the marriage proposal from Koh Abun, the owner, to be his secret (second) wife. "I don't know why, but I'm tired of being broke. I am fulfilled and relieved now with Koh Abun. And I've never hurt Cik Linda, either," says Ming to Firman, a young handsome film student who has a crush on her and wants her to become the main actress in his debut film.

The Catholic custom and religion of Koh Abun forbid him to marry for the second time; not to mention Cik Linda, his official wife who is his "good luck charm" and the head of the financial department in the restaurant. Hence, Ming just pretends that everything is running like usual and marries her boss quietly. Nobody officially is told about this marriage, except that his gambling card-game group knows. But, in her heart, Ming feels disappointed. She says in voice over,



Koh Abun is closer to Chinese culture than Catholicism. He puts good luck charms up to hang everywhere in the restaurant; even worse, he creates a



fake ID to get married.



Cik Linda investigates the relationship between Abun and Ming but pretends to know nothing about their secret marriage. Later, with her daughters, she gets revenge.



Salma hides her true feelings when she appears in public space. She even defends her husband and says good things about polygamous life on a TV talk show ...



... and to his colleagues.

"If he were all mine, I wouldn't mind living with him in my old tiny studio. But the situation is different and I don't want to fall for romance."

Actually, the fact that she has to keep silent about her marriage (including telling lies about the wedding ring) makes Ming unhappy. The idea of sharing her husband is also annoying to her. And most important, it hinders her from achieving her dream of acting in film. This is the reason why she keeps in touch with Firman, the aspiring director. In the end, when the status changed, she feels relieved. "For sure, I am going to be happier if I don't depend on anyone," says Ming in the closing scene.

How can a Catholic like Koh Abon take a second wife? The 1974 Marriage Law states:

"If both you and your fiancée have a Christian, Buddhist or Hindu religious wedding ceremony, you must hold the religious ceremony first, and then record the marriage with the Civil Registry Office. The Civil Registry will in turn issue a Marriage Certificate which is evidence of a legally valid wedding." [17] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

The film represents Koh Abun's character as more Chinese than Catholic. In the restaurant, there are some Chinese good luck charms. He even thinks that Cik Linda, his official wife, is a good luck charm, which is one reason that he does not want to divorce Linda. On the other hand, his religion and official law forbid him to take a second wife. So he makes a fake ID card (which states that he is still single) and bribes the officers to do this in order to get married. "I am not a Muslim who can have four wives," he says to Ming. But Ming answers: "Bullshit! There's a Chinese man in my hometown who has five wives." Koh Abun simply ignores the law and his religion. Thus, Abun and Ming practice a secret polygamy.

## Similarities between the cases

The film represents three different kind of polygamous lifestyles as practiced by characters from various social and educational backgrounds, religions, purposes, and ethnicities. The three main characters in the film hide their status as "victims" of polygamy. We see the different kinds of social face maintained by the female characters. The faces they show in front of the public sphere are the veiled faces, as they hide their true feelings deep in the bottom of their hearts. But when they enter private spaces, they throw away the "veils" that cover their faces, and then the real emotional frailty and disappointed feelings appear. When Salma first finds out about her "competitor," she gets upset. "You must shower every time you set foot in this house!" she says. He replies, "Every time I do it, I always bathe. That's what devoted Muslims must do, right?" With these words her husband tries to refresh Salma's memory about *Mandi Junub* (an obligatory shower after a Muslim has sex). Salma remains firm on her opinion: "Right, but you have to take another shower here!"

People often cannot see someone's real feelings in their face, unless perhaps one's closest friends or family. However, the spectators here can sense and feel the women's problems because they tell their inner thoughts (voice off and voice over), and the visual style emphasizes their gazes and gestures, especially when they are in the private sphere. They don't have any revolutionary actions or direct rebellion. They pretend to accept their fates, but they don't feel comfortable with the fact that they have to share a husband. Thus, in their own way and with their own intentions, they find the way out of the problem that polygamy poses.



Salma also calms Nadim down when he begins to criticize Abah's attitudes. But in private space ...

... she shows her anger. When she learns Abah took another wife, she exclaims, "What's wrong with me?"

By the end, all of them undergo a seemingly silent rebellion. The logic of the three characters' narratives shows that the main female characters can only be full human beings when they are finally detached from men. For Salma, she explicitly says that she only felt fully herself once her husband died. For Siti, when she and her lover — the second wife — leave the household they are finally free. And Ming comes into her own not only after Koh Abun leaves for the United States, but after she realizes she has to be an actress on her own merits and talent, not depending on a male director to make her career for her.

Dinata criticizes this patriarchal system in a satiric yet soft way, instead of a provoking a direct confrontation. To do this, a comedy of manners works well. The spectators realize the injustice of the situations within society that the female main characters have faced and, in an imaginative way, come to understand that the women can live in a free and independent way without their husbands or even any male character (in Ming's case: Firman the young director-wanna-be; in Salma's case: Nadim). The fact that in Salma's story the fourth wife arrives at the funeral and both Salma and Nadim react in a comic way highlights two things. First, this phenomenon could possibly happen to any woman, including the female spectators, and second, once again comedy has succeeded in sweetening the bitter pill of instruction. The spectators can feel this kind of comedy and learn ideas through the ensemble of acting and dialogues. For example, Nadim teases his mom: "Have a feeling that dad have another one (a newcomer)?" Salma answers: "So be it, as long as they don't bother us," and she continues: "Let's not make him uncomfortable as long as he's in this house." When Abah has a heart attack and the three wives gather, the cynical Nadim comments: "Finally dad got his wish. Here, all of his wives are gathered together in the same room." Salma replies ironically, "Maybe they'll all come to your graduation." Or when they bury Abah and the fourth wife appears with her little baby, the second and third wives get confused and uncomfortable and try to communicate in awkward way. Then Salma and Nadim have a little chat:

- Nadim: "He does a bit of giving us surprises."
- Salma: "For others, maybe. But not for you anymore, right?"
- Nadim: "If you are not surprised, neither am I."

In Ming's case, there is a scene when Koh Abun wants to pick his official wife from the airport (after visiting their children in USA), Ming teases him:

- Ming: "So you will 'do it' tonight? It has been a month since you both 'did it.'"



Salma begins to become cynical in how she responds to her husband. For example, after she knows that Abah takes Indri to Koh Abun's restaurant, she offers him roasted duck again and again, and Abah has no choice but to eat the meal.



At a race, when Abah brings Indri's daughter, Salma mocks him, "Why don't you bring the mother?"



- Koh Abun: "It will only be a 'duty.'"
- Ming: "A duty that will give you pleasure..."



Ming has a secret marriage. She cannot tell anyone that she married Abun so she tells everybody that her wedding ring is a fake diamond.



She can also freely date Firman. She is a Zhang-Ziyi wannabe but gets disappointed when Firman tells her that she did not get the leading role.

## Stronger wives, negative husbands



Siti always appears happy as she helps the family and seems to find nothing wrong with her life. Since it is an openly polygamous family, she has no shame about that.

Any depiction of rebellious female characters fighting for their rights or negative male characters were rarely shown in New-Order cinema. Before the Reformation era, women were represented as silent, passive, powerless or negative. Krishna Sen argues that some genres of Indonesian films precisely are based on seeing the woman but not having the woman seeing or speaking (Sen 1994: 134). Women are represented in small and unimportant parts.

"...some genres such as 'historical', 'martial arts', 'crime', and 'comedy' are on the whole about men and what the films define as men's desires and men's sphere of action" (Sen 1994: 135-136).

On screen, women were most commonly seen in domestic settings, dependent on and defined by the male protagonist (Sen 2008). Sita Aripurnami quotes feminist Myra Diarsi who claims that in Indonesian films at the time,

"...the acceptable woman is one who marries and lives beneath a man's shelter, whereas the woman who attempts to stand on her own is cursed and presented as an example of failure in life" (Jufri (eds.) 1992: 33).

Aripurnami adds that marriage is seen in terms of the man being in control and the woman yielding to his control (Jufri (eds.) 1992: 34). The stereotypical views of women still depict women who suffer from one problem and one problem only: love (Jufri (eds.) 1992: 42). Aripurnami argues:

"In Indonesian films, married women with children and a successful career are never shown as role-figures to emulate. A woman with a career who aspires to fulfill her personal ambitions is a selfish woman whose behavior will poorly affect the wellbeing and unity of her family. Her husband will be attracted to other women; her children will go astray and turn out to be delinquents" (Jufri (eds.) 1992: 42).

In another article, Aripurnami mentions that apparently a working woman is accepted for as long as she can manage to combine her job with the household and the care of the children (Oey-Gardiner & Bianpoen 2000, 53).



Deep down in her heart, she's unhappy and does not tell anybody about it until later she shares her feelings with Dwi.





Unlike New Order films, *Love for Share* combines depictions of negative, weak, male characters with independent, strong female characters. In Abah's case, his political and religious status leads him to neglect Salma and Nadim so he then feels ashamed to discover Salma still cares for him.



In Pak Lik's case, he always has sex on his mind. Although poor, he can act like an emperor, strengthening the patriarchal system.



He infects all his wives with a venereal disease, starting with Sri.

In some Post-Suharto Indonesian cinema, as Clark Marshall asserts, whereas the female characters become stronger, male characters are often negative and weak (Marshall 2004, 124). Negative male figures, for example, often are in plots that contain incidents of sexual harassment and domestic violence (*Ada Apa dengan Cinta, What's Up with Love*, Rudi Soedjarwo, 2001) or are depicted as irresponsible husbands and fathers who abandoned their families (*Pasir Berbisik*). Other films concentrate on the sense of aimlessness and alienation felt by the emerging post-New Order generation of Indonesian men (*Jelangkung, The Uninvited/ Ouji Board Ghosts*, Rizal Mantovani and Jose Purnowo, 2001) (Marshall 2004: 124).

The phenomena I mention above did not occur in the New Order regime because President Suharto enforced a patriarchal political system called *Bapakisme* (Fatherism). And although depictions of "female nature" in New Order cinema were ultimately sanctified in reproduction (motherhood), "female nature" also appeared to be constantly in danger of being perverted (Sen 1994, 138). To enforce a concept of "correct" women's roles, the government spread the ideology of "azas kekeluargaan" (Family Principle) and *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* (PKK, Family Welfare Movement) as released by the Directorate General for Rural Development, Jakarta, in 1978. PKK describes the five obligations of women (*Panca Dharma Wanita*), and prescribes for Indonesian women the following five roles: (Oey-Gardiner & Bianpoen 2000:58)

- wife, standing by her husband
- household manager
- mother, responsible for reproduction
- educator of the children
- and citizen of Indonesia.

The father has a position as a pivotal figure, the ruler and leader of the household. Mothers and wives are considered "*ikut suami*" (follow the husbands), and "*Ratu Rumah Tangga*" (Queen of the Household). Social and Education activist Henny Supolo Sitepu claims that the term *Ratu Rumah Tangga* — considered a noble role by New Order government — is "an empty title." She underlines that women often have no choice but to accept the role already socially assigned (Oey-Gardiner & Bianpoen 2000: 189-190).

From a political standpoint, the role of mothers and wives underwent *housewifisation* and domestication. For Maria Mies, *housewifisation* is

"a process by which women are socially defined as housewives, dependent for their sustenance on the income of their husbands; irrespective of whether they are de facto housewives or not. The social definition of housewives is the counterpart of the social definition of men as breadwinners, irrespective of their actual contribution to their families' subsistence" (quoted in Suryakusuma 2004: 162-163).

Julia Suryakusuma calls it State *Ibuism*, a theory adopted from Maria Mies' *housewifisation*, Madelon Djajadiningrat's *Ibuism*, and a keyword approach to the state developed by Michael van Langenberg (Suryakusuma 2004: 162). State *Ibuism* means the domestication of Indonesian women (Suryakusuma 2004: 166). The image of an ideal woman is that of someone 'accepting their natural role' as wife and mother, fully and solely responsible for the social development of her children. And there is almost no recognition of women as individuals (Oey-Gardiner & Bianpoen 2000: 17).

Under the New Order Regime, the state also often defined itself as a "family," as



Pak Lik wants to have a boy, a sign of his patriarchal attitude, so he chooses to believe that the unborn baby carried by Sri will be a boy.



Koh Abun is an irresponsible husband. He marries Ming and promise to talk to Cik Linda about it, and then Cik Linda asks him to sell the apartment and car. Finally, he moves to the U.S. after he gets a green card, and he just leaves Ming a bunch of money. Actually, he probably applied for a green card before he planned to marry Ming or was forced by Cik Linda to move the whole family to the United States.



Salma is a career woman, a doctor who runs a small clinic. She does not maintain the ideology of "Ikut Suami" (following the husband). In private space, she shows a cynical and critical

expressed in its propagation of *azas kekeluargaan* (the family principle) (Suryakusuma 2004: 169). *Bapak* (father) is the primary source of power and *ibu* (mother) is one of the media which expresses this power. And, of course, President Suharto is the ultimate *Bapak* (Suryakusuma 2004: 169). So, the father and husband role was supposed to be represented in the man's good behavior and attitude.

As a post-New-Order film, *Love for Share* depicts life as functioning in the opposite way. It breaks New Order patriarchal ideology. A mother no longer becomes the medium or conduit for husband/father power. The mothers and wives do not "*ikut suami*" (follow the husbands). Even though there are no revolutionary actions, silently the women rebel in their own way. The female characters become stronger, and male characters weaken or are depicted as having negative attitudes. At the same time the film also criticizes the phenomena and discourses that recur after the downfall of Suharto, namely the institution and practice of polygamy. The film has a clear standpoint that critiques its own era.

In Salma's case, the script's critique breaks the *housewifification* system and proves that a career woman can be an ideal female character and can fulfill her highest idealism by building and running an affordable medical clinic for women.

In Siti's case, the fact that there are so many little female children in that tiny house comically underlines patriarchal ideology. Pak Lik wants a boy and he will always try to have one. One scene depicts how Pak Lik hopes that the baby inside his first wife, Sri, will be a boy. A boy, a future man, is the center of patriarchal system; he will be a husband or a father who always controls his daughter and wife. Indeed, Pak Lik is a useful figure to represent *Bapakisme*. In a scene, after making love with his fourth wife, Pak Lik sits in the sofa and commands: "Coffee would be good...". One of the wives goes to kitchen in a hurry to make him a cup of coffee. And Siti's voice over ironically comments: "Pak Lik acts like an emperor with his concubines. He doesn't realize that there's a disease he transmitting to all of us..."

In Ming's case, it is not Koh Abun who has the control, but he is a tool for Ming to achieve her dreams (get out from poverty, get a new apartment and car, quit waitressing, and pursue an acting career). "Koh Abun is not the only man in my life, but he understands all of my needs," Ming's voice over says. And in this segment, the very idea that a mistress can be a protagonist in this way effects a huge change in the Indonesian cinema scene.

## Conclusion

Surely the fact of polygamous life in Indonesia is a not very well hidden public secret. Still most people do not really know about life inside polygamous families, or the reasons why some women want to be second, third, or fourth wives. Both Nia Dinata and the film try to answer these questions: "Why do those female characters want to practice polygamy?" "How do polygamous families live their daily lives?" The film explores an inner reality beneath the surface, that of women's feelings and lives as they experience the shaping effect of polygamy. On the other hand, in a more sociological way, the film replicates a kind of national reality based on or inspired by three female characters that Dinata actually found in her two years of doing research on the issue. As Post-Suharto cinema, the film has succeeded in breaking the State Ibuism and Bapakism propaganda formerly embodied in the New Order's patriarchal ideology.



attitude toward her polygamous husband.



Siti does not enjoy the husband-wife relationship. She feels disgust towards sexual intercourse and gladly gives her turn in the love-making schedule to another wife.



Siti runs away with her lesbian lover. She protests against a patriarchal system because she cannot feel the warm of a gentle love, which she finds in Dwi.

One aspect of the current situation that the film clearly presents is that there are difficulties for the other characters (who in effect represent most people in Indonesia) to know these "insider" stories of polygamy since all of the main female characters always hide their own feelings toward the issue when they appear in public space. They have their own reasons. But the film uses these three narratives to show how, with their own way and style, all the women protagonists protest their situation. They rebel against polygamy, silently, in secret. Salma keeps the "secret" until Abah dies. Siti runs away with Dwi. Ming, since Abun left, feels free to chase her dream as an actress. In the end, all of the female main characters are independent of all of the male characters.

Although polygamy is a controversial issue, as I elaborated in the first paragraphs, the film has been broadly welcomed. In fact, *Love for Share* became the official selection from Indonesia for the 2006 Academy Awards. The comedy of manners approach makes the film a safe place, and Dinata shows the reasons of polygamy's practitioners.

[Go to Notes page](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



Ming represents an active protagonist who is also a mistress. In the New Order era, such women were often depicted as seductresses and sex symbols in a negative way.



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

1. I am grateful to Chuck Kleinhans for his suggestions for strengthening this essay. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. There were some pro and contra positions related to this marriage. "Polygamy is halal (allowed in Islam). Extramarital affairs are haram (forbidden)," said one of their posters, according to the Internet site below. Moments later, another group of women marched at the same location, shouting anti-polygamy slogans. They chanted to the tune of a well-known children's song:

"One, I love my mother. Two, I love my father. Three, I love my brothers and sisters. One, two, three, I reject polygamy."

Please check: <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20965272-1702,00.htm>.

On the fall of Aa' Gym, James B Hoesterey writes:

"Heartbroken and betrayed, his followers staged a backlash and the event became a national scandal. Infotainment shows and gossip magazines circulated stories of female followers who shredded his pictures, boycotted his television shows, and cancelled weekend pilgrimages to his Islamic school and 'spiritual tourism' complex, Daarut Tauhiid (DT). Pressured by hundreds of protest text messages, SBY ordered a review of the national marriage law. Gymnastiar lost his pending television contracts; his business empire started to crumble, and DT became a ghost town."

Please check: <http://www.insideindonesia.org/content/view/1011/47/>

3. Islam Religion, 27 February, 2009.  
<http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/325> .

4. *The Jakarta Post*, 25 February, 2009.  
<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2007/06/28/religious-officials-say-polygamy-not-basic-right-muslims.html-o>.

5. Please check: <http://www.indonesiamatters.com/857/abdullah-aa-gym-gymnastiar/>

6. Islam Religion, 27 February 2009.

<http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/325>.

7. Gerakan Reformasi (Reformation Movement) was a popular rebellion that gave rise to an enormous change in the political situation of Indonesia: the downfall of President Suharto's regime (1966-1998) in May 1998. In political terms, the Reformation demanded greater democracy, honesty and accountability in public life, and policies that secure people's welfare (Budiman (eds.) 1999: 73)

8. Please check:

<http://www.twitchfilm.net/archives/009347.html>

9. Wikipedia, 26 February 2009.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy\\_film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy_film).

10. Britannica, 26 February 2009.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/362554/comedy-of-manners> .

11. Kusrini, Asmayani. "Selamat untuk Nia Dinata!" ("Congratulations to Nia Dinata") in *Rumahfilm.org*, November 12th 2007.

12. Dinata also makes social statements through her portrayal of how people handled the tsunami. For example, she tells about finding trusted donation institutions, or pointing out some political leaders or celebrities who use the issues for their own popularity by asking journalist to go with them.

13. "Pengantar ke Dunia Film" ("An Introduction to Film World") in *Usmar Ismail Mengupas Film (Usmar Ismail on Film)*. Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1986, second edition. My translation. [[return to page 2](#)]

14. Quoted in *Polygamy Phenomenon in Love for Share*, Indonesia, dir. Nia Dinata, 2006. In an interview written in English, Dinata said:

"I've been observing the phenomenon of polygamy in my country since I was in my pre-teen years. A lot of women in my family discussed it and I often eavesdropped. I saw sadness in their eyes and they accepted the condition although when it came to discussing it among women they trust, they were able to tell their true feelings and disappointments. I guess this made me curious and my concern grew until I decided I had to write a script about it and direct this film."

There are also similar statements in the DVD documentary. See:

<http://www.cinemawithoutborders.com/news/127/ARTICLE/1209/2007-03-03.html>.

15. This situation affirms Karl Heider's theory in *Indonesian Cinema, National Culture on Screen*. When discussing the basic moral conflict of a culture, Heider wrote that instead of good-evil binary position, Indonesian films prefer binaries of order-disorder. He highlights the fact that Indonesian movies usually do not have bad guys.

“The Indonesian figures create disorder, confusion, chaos ... Order and disorder. This is the key to much of Indonesian life” (Heider, Karl. *Indonesian Cinema, National Culture on Screen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991, p 35).

16. U.S. Embassy in Jakarta.

<http://www.usembassyjakarta.org/consular/ACSMARRIAGE.html>. 25 February 2009.

Also check:

<http://www.expatriot.or.id/info/validityofmarriage.html>

17. U.S. Embassy in Jakarta. [[return to page 3](#)]

<http://www.usembassyjakarta.org/consular/ACSMARRIAGE.html>.

Also check: <http://www.expatriot.or.id/info/validityofmarriage.html>

## Bibliography

### Books

Armes, Roy. *Film and Reality: an Historical Survey*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

Badalu, John and Kusumaningrum, Ade (Eds). *Berbagi Suami (Fenomena Poligami di Indonesia): Skenario dan Cerita di balik Layar. (Love for Share — Phenomenon of Polygamy in Indonesia: Scenario and story behind the screen)*. Jakarta: Penerbit Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2006.

Blackburn, Susan. *Woman and State in Modern Indonesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Brenner, Suzanne. “Democracy, Polygamy, and Women in Post-Reformasi Indonesia” in *Social Analysis*, Volume 50, Issue 1, Spring 2006, 164–170.

Budiman, Arief (eds). *Reformasi, Crisis and Change in Indonesia*. Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1999.

Clark, Marshall. “Indonesian cinema: Exploring cultures of masculinity, censorship and violence” in Heryanto, Ariel (ed). *Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Clark, Marshall. “Men, Masculinities and Symbolic Violence in Recent Indonesian Cinema” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35 (1), pp 113-131 February 2004. Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2004.

Heider, Karl. *Indonesian cinema: national culture on screen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1991.

Ismail, Usmar. *Mengupas Film (To Analyze Film)*. Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1986.



Jufri, Moch, et al (eds). *Indonesian Film Panorama*. Jakarta: Permanent Committee of the Indonesian Film Festival, 1992.

Oey-Gardiner, Mayling and Carla Bianpoen (eds). *Indonesian Women: the Journey Continues*. Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies Publishing, Australian National University, 2000.

Said, Salim. *Shadows on the silver screen: a social history of Indonesian film*. Jakarta: Lontar Foundation, 1991.

Suryakusuma, Julia. *Sex, Power, and Nation: An Anthology of Writings, 1979-2003*. Jakarta: Metafor Publishing, 2004.

## Internet references

<http://www.cinematical.com/2006/04/24/tribeca-review-love-for-share/>

[www.kalyanashira.com](http://www.kalyanashira.com)

[www.berbagisuami.com](http://www.berbagisuami.com)

<http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=features2006&content=jump&jump=review&dept=cannes&nav=RCannes&articleid=VE1117930572>

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20965272-1702,00.htm>.

<http://www.insideindonesia.org/content/view/1011/47/>

<http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/325>

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2007/06/28/religious-officials-say-polygamy-not-basic-right-muslims.html-o>

<http://www.indonesiamatters.com/857/abdullah-aa-gym-gymnastiar>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy\\_film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy_film)

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/362554/comedy-of-manners>

[Rumahfilm.org](http://Rumahfilm.org), November 12th 2007.

<http://www.usembassyjakarta.org/consular/ACSMARRIAGE.html>.

<http://www.expatriat.or.id/info/validityofmarriage.html>

## Filmography

*Berbagi Suami* (*Love for Share*, Indonesia, dir. Nia Dinata, 2006)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Gender and class in the Singaporean film *881*

by [Brenda Chan](#)



Little Papaya did badly in her studies and ended up selling papayas in the market.



Big Papaya managed to attend a pre-university institution.



Big Papaya and Little Papaya are both fans of real-life *getai* singer Chen Jin Lang. They met at a *getai* show and became sworn sisters.

Film production[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] in Singapore started in the 1920s and 1930s, and its film industry experienced a golden age from 1947 to 1972, when the Cathay-Keris studios competed with Shaw's Malay Film Productions in producing Malay-language movies.[2] The focus on producing Malay-language films stemmed from the fact that, prior to the country's independence in 1965, Singapore was part of British Malaya and joined the Federation of Malaysia briefly in 1963.

However, Malay film production ceased in 1972, and throughout the 1980s Singapore did not have an indigenous film industry. It was only in the 1990s that a new generation of directors began to revive local film production in the island republic.[3] The renewal of film-making in the 1990s was in part supported by the Singapore government's policy in transforming Singapore into a Global City for the Arts, as it recognized the commercial potential of the arts and creative industries in boosting the competitiveness of the economy after the Asian financial crisis in 1997.[4]

Three Singaporean movie directors have received academic attention either because they have produced commercially successful features or have been critically acclaimed in the film festival circuits: Jack Neo, Eric Khoo and Royston Tan.[5] Jack Neo's *Money No Enough* (1998) still holds the record of being the top-grossing locally-produced movie, and ranks as the fourth top-grossing film in Singapore after *Spiderman 3* (2007), *Titanic* (1997) and *Jurassic Park* (1997).[6] In contrast with Neo, Eric Khoo's auteurist films do not do as well in the box office but have won several awards in international film festivals.

Royston Tan's films depict people in the underclass who are alienated and abandoned in rapidly modernizing Singapore. His 2003 feature film on teenage gangs and juvenile delinquency, entitled *15*, was heavily censored, earning him a "bad boy" reputation with the media authorities in Singapore. Royston Tan went on to direct a short film called *Cut* in 2004, which used satire and camp aesthetics to criticize and mock Singapore's censorship policies towards the arts and media. Needless to say, *Cut* also displeased the government.[7]

This paper examines the articulation of gender and class in the popular Singaporean film directed by Royston Tan, entitled *881*. *881* is a musical that relates the story of Big Papaya and Little Papaya, two girls from working-class backgrounds, who aspire to perform in *getai* (a Mandarin word that literally means "song stage") shows staged during the annual Hungry Ghost Festival celebrated by the Chinese community in Singapore. The two girls finally succeed in becoming the Papaya Sisters, the hottest singing duo in *getai* performances, after being endowed with powerful voices by a *getai* goddess. In their efforts to battle their *getai* rivals, the Durian Sisters, the Papaya Sisters are assisted by



Aunt Ling and her son, Guan Yin. The movie ends tragically with Little Papaya dying from cancer, leaving Big Papaya to continue her career as a *getai* singer.

The five companies co-investing in the production of *881* are Zhao Wei Films (owned by Eric Khoo), Mediacorp Raintree Pictures, Media Development Authority (the state's regulatory body for film and broadcast media), Infinite Frameworks (a post-production company) and Scorpio East, a distributor of video entertainment.[8] The movie was screened in August, 2007, to coincide with the Hungry Ghost Festival in the seventh month of the lunar calendar when *getai* concerts are staged all over the island of Singapore. *881* attracted many middle-aged men and women viewers from the working class who typically did not go to the cinemas.



The Papaya Sisters practise in front of experienced *getai* singers Wang Lei (who impersonates Taiwanese Hokkien singer Chen Lei), Karen, and three drag queens. Real-life blind busker Chen Weilian, in a cameo role in this film, listens at the sidelines. Wang Lei criticises the Papayas for their poor singing skills, while Chen Weilian says they lack emotion in their singing.



Big Papaya and Little Papaya want to form a singing duo to perform at *getai* concerts. Aunt Ling and her son, Guan Yin, help them in their singing practice.



Aunt Ling has no choice but to take the Papaya Sisters to her estranged twin sister, the *Getai* Goddess. The Papaya Sisters ask the *Getai* Goddess to help them.



The *Getai* Goddess asks the Papaya Sisters, "Is singing so important to you?"



The Papaya Sisters plead for the *Getai* Goddess' assistance. The Goddess lays down five rules the girls must obey ...



... a) respect all spirits; b) be kind to people; c) watch their words; d) obey the rules of each *getai*; and e) stay pure, and love no man.



The Goddess endows the Papaya Sisters with powerful magical voices.

As a result of aggressive advertising in the English-language media, the movie



The Papaya Sisters become the hottest *getai* duo in town.

further intrigued many young Singaporeans to watch real *getai* concerts, which were usually dismissed as sleazy and low-class entertainment for older folks.[9] There was heavy coverage of *881*, from production to premiere, in Mediacorp's English-language news channel, Channel News Asia. STOMP, the interactive online content portal for Singapore's largest newspaper (*The Straits Times*), also launched *Getai A-Go-Go*, which it claimed to be the only website about *getai* in Singapore, a few days after the opening of *881*.<sup>[10]</sup> The bilingual website (in English and Chinese) provides dates, times and venues of real-life *getai* shows in Singapore, features profiles of prominent *getai* artistes, blogs of *getai* singers, and organises an annual *getai* awards ceremony, which continues to run in 2008. *881* was, and still continues to be, promoted in the website, with music videos/trailers of the movie available for viewing on the Internet.<sup>[11]</sup> *The Straits Times*, in its hard copy version, has also covered human-interest news stories about real-life *getai* performers. Prior to the release of *881*, *getai* concerts are staged every year during the Hungry Ghost Festival, but never have they generated so much coverage and interest in the local English-language press.

*881* emerged as the top grossing locally-produced movie and the 10th most watched movie in Singapore in 2007.<sup>[12]</sup> It was also screened at various international film festivals, such as the 12th Pusan International Film Festival 2007, 44th Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival 2007, and 37th International Film Festival Rotterdam 2008.<sup>[13]</sup> The film's international debut at the Pusan International Film Festival was sold out, and some 1000 fans turned up at a meet-the-fans session with the director and cast of *881*.<sup>[14]</sup>

Given that the main characters of this film are working-class women, I want to



Aunt Ling and Guan Yin cheer the Papayas amongst the audience. Guan Yin is also the photographer for the Papaya Sisters.

understand how the film *881*, as a popular cultural form, addresses and configures the working-class female. The working-class women in this film not only speak but also sing in Hokkien, a southern Chinese dialect that has been systematically suppressed by the Singapore government in its official campaign to promote Mandarin as the *lingua franca* of the local Chinese community. On the other hand, Guan Yin, the only major male character in *881*, is a mute. The film presents moments of contradiction between male and female, between melodrama and comedy, between the English-speaking and Mandarin-speaking Singaporeans — all of which open up space for challenging and disrupting gender, linguistic and class hierarchies in Singapore. I will begin this paper by providing some contextual background about social class in Singapore, and will review existing literature about representations of the working class in Singaporean cinema, before proceeding with the analysis of *881*.

## Representations of the working class in Singaporean films

Singapore is a small island republic at the tip of the Malay peninsula with a population of approximately four million. Originally a British Crown Colony, Singapore became an independent state in 1965. Its multi-ethnic society is made up of Chinese (75.2%), Malays (13.6%), Indians (8.8%) and others (2.4%).<sup>[15]</sup> As a colonial legacy, English is used as the language of government and commerce, and as the primary medium of instruction in schools. The other official languages in the nation, besides English, are Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, each representing the language of the three major ethnic groups in Singapore.

To alleviate high unemployment and widespread poverty in the 1960s, the government initially adopted the economic strategy of export-oriented industrialisation with a heavy reliance on foreign capital, especially multinational companies (MNCs). Three decades later, Singapore emerged as an affluent Newly Industrialised Economy. Today it is one of the richest countries in Asia, with a per capita income of S\$51,119 (approximately US\$33,330.57) in 2007.<sup>[16]</sup> More than 80% of the Singaporean population live in public housing estates built by the government, most of whom own the state-built apartment flats that they live in.<sup>[17]</sup> Policies by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government are pragmatist with an overwhelming emphasis on ensuring economic survival and development.<sup>[18]</sup> Concomitantly the pursuit of higher material standards of living becomes “well entrenched as part of the ‘truths’ of being Singaporean.”<sup>[19]</sup>

Given its industrial capitalist economy, Singapore is a socially stratified society and Chang Han-Yin has identified five classes in Singapore:

"(1) office-based bureaucratic class (legislators, administrators, managers, and officers ); (2) property-based employer class; (3) expertise-based professional class (professionals, para-professionals; technicians); (4) clerical skills-based clerical class; (5) manual operation-based working class (production and transportation workers, waiters and waitresses, sales workers, fishermen, and farmers). The first three classes, which enjoy more income, higher status ... and greater controlling power, constitute the *upperdivision*



Big Papaya's mother disapproves of her daughter's decision to be a *getai* performer. She chases Big Papaya out of the home.



Aunt Ling comforts Big Papaya, and offers to let the latter stay in her home. Aunt Ling warns Big Papaya to be careful of her son, calling him a sex



maniac.



In a fantasy sequence, Aunt Ling and the Papaya Sisters sit in a seashell under the sea, while Guan Yin swims around them. Guan Yin in his swimming trunks becomes an erotic object for the gaze of female and gay spectators.



The Papaya Sisters move from one public housing estate to another, to perform at *getai* shows. Chua Chu Kang and Sengkang are names of public housing estates in Singapore. In the background are state-built apartment blocks that are always in the rear view as Guan Yin drives his car — they never seem to go away.

of the class hierarchy and the remaining two classes form the *lower division* (emphasis in original)."[20]

The complexity of class divisions in Singapore, however, has been conveniently simplified by the Singapore government into two broad categories: the *heartlander* and the *cosmopolitan*. These two terms first appeared in then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's National Day Rally Speech in 1999. The cosmopolitans refer to the elite English-speaking class in Singapore with an international outlook:

"They speak English but are bilingual. They have skills that command good incomes — banking, IT, engineering, science and technology. They produce goods and services for the global market. Many cosmopolitans use Singapore as a base to operate in the region. They can work and be comfortable anywhere in the world." [21]

The heartlanders, on the other hand, make up the majority of the population, especially those who live in the public housing estates built by the Housing Development Board (HDB):

"The other group, the heartlanders, make their living within the country. Their orientations and interests are local rather than international. Their skills are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish. They include taxi-drivers, stallholders, provision shop owners, production workers and contractors." [22]

The heartlanders are also seen by the government as being conservative and more rooted in their cultural traditions, compared to the mobile cosmopolitans. [23]

The PAP government is known for its strong anti-communist stance and its wariness towards class-based loyalties.[24] However, class has been a recurrent motif in Singaporean cinema. The most prominent directors, such as Eric Khoo, Jack Neo and Royston Tan, have all dealt with working-class Singaporeans living in public housing estates — the so-called "heartlanders" — as the subject matter of their films.

Eric Khoo's first feature film, *Mee Pok Man* (1995), is about a poor dim-witted noodle seller who is obsessed with a prostitute called Bunny. One night, Bunny is wounded from a car accident, and he takes her back to his one-room flat, hoping to nurse her to health. But Bunny dies in his home and the noodle seller ends up having a sexual relationship with her corpse. In the film, the Mee Pok Man's world of a dilapidated HDB flat, old coffee shops, and prostitution in the red-light district is juxtaposed against scenes showing consumerist celebrations of Christmas in downtown Singapore, and white-collar office workers scurrying to work in the Central Business District.[25] Khoo's second film, *12 Storeys* (1997), explores the lives of three Singaporean families living in the same HDB apartment block. Main characters in the film include: Ah Gu, a middle-aged food seller who marries a wife from mainland China but the latter refuses to have sex with him; San San, a lonely spinster who contemplates suicide because she cannot get over her late mother's verbal abuse; Trixie and Tee, two teenagers who are resentful towards their domineering eldest brother Meng and his paternalistic attitude. [See *Jump Cut* essay on [Mee Pok Man and 12 Storeys](#).]

By highlighting dysfunctional and unhappy HDB residents suffering from loneliness, alienation and marginalization in Singapore's urban environment, Eric Khoo's films function as a critique and counter-discourse against the



Aunt Ling suspects that Guan Yin is in love. She teases her son about his pet cock and asks him whether he likes Big Papaya or Little Papaya.



Chen Jinlang, a real-life *getai* singer, appears on television. He has contracted cancer but struggles to perform in a wheelchair.

official image of Singapore as a clean, green, efficient, wholesome, affluent and cosmopolitan city, which the state projects to tourists and citizens.[26]

Jack Neo's films, in contrast with those of Eric Khoo, depict not just failed lives, but ordinary Singaporeans' struggles to succeed in a materialistic and achievement-oriented society.[27] Jack Neo wrote the script and starred in the wildly popular *Money No Enough / Qian Bu Gong Yong* (1997), which tells of the financial woes of three friends. Chew (played by Jack Neo) is a Chinese-educated manager without paper qualifications, who is passed over for promotion when his company hires a young, English-speaking overseas-educated "cosmopolitan." He resigns in anger but is faced with a mountain of household bills to pay. Ong (Mark Lee) is a renovation contractor who is threatened by loan sharks. Then there is Hui (Henry Thia), a coffee shop assistant who has problems finding a spouse because of his low salary and ugly looks. The trio finally pool some money together to start a car-washing business, which eventually thrives and lifts them out of dire straits. Uhde and Uhde suggest,

"The film's local mass appeal stems partly from the fact that its theme of financial hardship was...one that many viewers could identify with at a time when the entire region was facing a severe economic downturn." [28]



The Papaya Sisters are saddened when they hear of Chen Jinlang's illness. The Sisters have supper with Guan Yin in a local coffee shop. Big Papaya sits with her legs open wide.



The Papaya Sisters try to raise funds for Chen Jinlang's cancer treatment. Meanwhile Little Papaya is ill with cancer, too. But she does not tell anyone and tries not to show that she is unwell.



News reports of Chen Jinlang's



Little Papaya feels that she will suffer

death.

the same fate as her idol.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Big Papaya's mother still refuses to accept her.



Big Papaya's mother, a former *getai* singer, breaks out in a heart-wrenching Hokkien song as she thinks of her daughter.



Guan Yin comforts a weeping Big Papaya, and the two end up kissing in the car. Big Papaya has violated the last rule that the *Getai* Goddess has

Although Neo's heartlander films often contain direct critique of government policies, his narratives eventually lose their critical edge because they often have "feel-good" happy endings that buy into the success myth that "hard work will produce results eventually."<sup>[29]</sup><sup>[[open endnotes in new window](#)]</sup> The corollary is that Neo's films tend to reinforce the ideological hegemony of the government.<sup>[30]</sup>

As for Royston Tan, he is most famous for the film *15* (2003), which features five real-life streetboys (Melvin, Vynn, Shaun, Erick and Armani) who are involved in gang-fights, self-mutilation, drug trafficking and drug consumption. In one segment Shaun and Erick brutally punish a group of snobbish, English-speaking schoolboys who call them "Chinese hooligans."<sup>[31]</sup> This film thus exposes the darker realities in Singapore's orderly society, with its "hidden underclass" of a "Mandarin-speaking caste, separated from the English-speakers in a bizarre 'merit-based' intellectual apartheid."<sup>[32]</sup>

Singaporean cinema, from *Mee Pok Man*, to *Money No Enough*, to *15*, has always emphasized class differences in Singapore society, by highlighting the struggle between the isolated and marginalized lower classes and the English-speaking, cosmopolitan, middle-class Singaporeans. In terms of gender representations in the Singaporean films I have discussed, Eric Khoo has been criticised for having his female characters in *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys* subject to a controlling male gaze by the viewer, filmmaker, and male protagonists.<sup>[33]</sup> For instance, in *Mee Pok Man*, there are lingering shots of the naked body of Bunny the prostitute in bed, and the dead Bunny eventually becomes an object of *Mee Pok Man*'s necrophilic desires.

It is, however, not fair to say that the female characters in Eric Khoo's early films lack agency. Bunny dreams of going to London with her English boyfriend, while Ah Gu's mainland Chinese wife in *12 Storeys* marries a Singaporean man as a route out of poverty in China. Both women are pro-actively trying various means to escape from poverty and improve their financial situation, compared to some of the male characters who are simply resigned to remaining in the underclass. Eric Khoo's 2005 film, *Be With Me*, shows even greater effort in exploring the female subject. It is made up of three stories, two of which are revolve around females. One is a semi-autobiographic sketch of a deaf and blind woman, Theresa Chan; while the other documents two teenage girls' exploration of a lesbian relationship.<sup>[34]</sup>

As for Jack Neo's films, such as *Money No Enough* (1998), *I Not Stupid / Xiaohai Bu Ben* (2002), and its sequel *I Not Stupid Too* (2006), the narratives tend to be focused firmly from the male perspective. The most notable female roles in *I Not Stupid* and *I Not Stupid Too / Xiaohai Bu Ben 2* are nagging, controlling, middle-class mothers. In fact, Selena Tan's role as a bossy, fierce, English-speaking mother in *I Not Stupid* is a blatant personification of the authoritarian PAP government. Similarly, Royston Tan has been accused for the absence of women in *15*. Ho Tzu Nyen notes that the five streetboys' world appear to be "virtually emptied of women" and if the female do appear in the film, she becomes "a profound 'other' to be quickly annihilated", such as the middle-aged women who are beaten up by the boys for staring at them with disapproving looks.<sup>[35]</sup> *881* (2007) breaks ground with its predominantly

set for her.



Aunt Ling breaks into a sorrowful Hokkien number as she sews stage costumes for the Papaya Sisters. There is a heavy dose of nostalgia in 881 – nostalgia for *getai* concerts, Hokkien oldies, and 1960s Mandarin films from Hong Kong. On the pillar in front of her sewing machine are pictures of famous Hong Kong film stars in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Lin Dai and Le Di.



Aunt Ling is finally reconciled with her twin sister, the *Getai* Goddess.

female cast, which radically departs from the earlier male-centric films of Royston Tan.[36] It is in this context of the cinematic representation of the working class in Singapore, that I shall now move on to a close reading of 881, with an emphasis on how gender intersects with class in the film.

## Plot synopsis of 881

Big Papaya (played by Yeo Yann Yann) and Little Papaya (Mindee Ong) are both born in 1982. Little Papaya's parents died of cancer when she was young, and she was to be stricken by cancer at 25. Big Papaya came from a dysfunctional family — her mother divorced her father, remarried and then returned to her first husband. Big Papaya did very well in school and attended a pre-university institution in Singapore, which meant that she had the potential of going to the university. Little Papaya, on the other hand, failed all the subjects and ended up selling fruit in a market.

Big Papaya and Little Papaya are fans of Chen Jin Lang, the most famous *getai* singer in Singapore (Chen was a real-life *getai* performer who died of cancer in 2006). The Chinese believe that in the seventh month of the lunar calendar, the Gates of Hell open and ghosts roam the streets. *Getai* refers to open-air concerts that are staged in the seventh month to entertain the spirits, with singers, dancers and other entertainers performing on stage. Big Papaya and Small Papaya got to know each other when watching a Chen Jin Lang concert and became sworn sisters.

Big Papaya and Small Papaya want to form a singing duo to perform at *getai* shows. A plump seamstress called Aunt Ling (played by real-life *getai* host Liu Ling Ling), and her mute son, Guan Yin (played by Qi Yuwu), help the Papaya Sisters in their efforts. However *getai* veterans comment that the Papaya Sisters sing badly and lack emotion in their singing. Desperate to improve their singing skills, the Papaya Sisters seek help from Aunt Ling's estranged twin sister, the Goddess of *Getai*. The Goddess wears a bright red sequined gown with gigantic golden wings on her back, and dwells in a temple. She asks the Papaya Sisters, "Is singing so important to you?" In a reversal of the mermaid's tale, the Goddess bestows the girls with powerful voices, on the condition that they must "stay pure, and no man love."



Little Papaya goes for steroid injections in order to continue singing at *getai* shows.



Guan Yin fetches Little Papaya from the clinic. He tries to hold her hand, but she brushes him away.





Aunt Ling tells the Papaya Sisters of her sexual exploits with Guan Yin's father.



Big Papaya feels guilty about her relationship with Guan Yin.

Big Papaya's mother, however disapproves of her singing at *getai* shows, and drives her out of her home (an old HDB flat). Aunt Ling offers to let Big Papaya stay at her flat, but warns Big Papaya to watch out for her lustful son, Guan Yin. Guan Yin's job is to chauffeur the Papaya Sisters from one *getai* stage to another in different districts in Singapore. In his leisure, he plays with a pet cock.

The Papaya Sisters soon become the hottest *getai* act in town. Although the sisters speak mostly Mandarin (one of the four official languages in Singapore) in the film, they sing Hokkien songs during their *getai* performances. Hokkien is a southern Chinese dialect originating from Fujian province in China, and is widely spoken by Chinese heartlanders in Singapore. The Papaya Sisters perform to canvass donations for Chen Jin Lang's cancer treatment, when Chen appears on television in a wheelchair, vowing to live and die for the stage. Meanwhile, Little Papaya suffers from cancer herself, but she refuses to tell anyone that her body is failing. Chen Jin Lang eventually dies, much to the sadness of the Papaya Sisters, Aunt Ling and performers in the *getai* circuit.

Big Papaya falls for Guan Yin and kisses him passionately in the car, violating her promise to the Goddess that she must not let any man touch her. Little Papaya is also interested in Guan Yin, but she holds fast to the condition set by the Goddess. So when Guan Yin makes a paper doll for her and tries to hold her hand, Little Papaya rejects his advances.



The success of the Papayas invites the jealousy of another *getai* duo, the Durian Sisters. The Durians are backed by their sugar daddy, who is a gangster.



The Durian Sisters taunt the Papayas. The Papaya Sisters retaliate by saying that the English-educated Durians ...



... cannot even lip-sync Hokkien songs properly. The two pairs of girls start fighting during the *getai* show.





Aunt Ling breaks up their fight and confronts the Durians' sugar daddy.

The rise of the Papaya Sisters invites the jealousy of Durian Sisters, another female *getai* singing duo formed by a pair of twins. The English-speaking Durian Sisters (played by Eurasian twins Teh May Wan and Teh Choy Wan) lip-sync Hokkien songs in their performances because they are not proficient in Hokkien and speak little Mandarin. They try to attract audiences through their pretty looks and sexy stage costumes (such as bra tops). The Durian Sisters shoot darts at the Papaya Sisters and challenge the latter to a duel at the Lixing Stage on the 30th night of the seventh month.

On the night of the "battle," the Papaya Sisters compete with the Durian Sisters in a singing marathon with various changes of outlandish stage costumes. The Durian Sisters put on bra tops that look like spikes on the husk of the durian fruit, and shoot out "laser beams" from the spikes of their "durian bras" as they shake their boobs vigorously. The Papaya Sisters try to counter the "force" with the divine powers that the Goddess has given them, but Big Papaya is unable to summon the special power she is supposed to have. The Papaya Sisters eventually collapse to the ground, lying about a metre apart from each other. Little Papaya and Big Papaya call out to each other, with Little Papaya writhing in pain as she struggles desperately to reach Big Papaya's hand. As Little Papaya faints, the *getai* audience are touched by the strong emotional bond between the two sisters.

Little Papaya is hospitalised due to her illness. Big Papaya begs the Goddess to save Little Papaya, but the Goddess says that it is her fate. "This is not her fate," cries Big Papaya, "I was the one who sinned!" Big Papaya visits Little Papaya in the hospital and wants to confess her relationship with Guan Yin. Little Papaya simply smiles and promises that she will go on singing with Big Papaya no matter what happens. Little Papaya eventually dies of cancer, and in the seventh month of the years to come, Big Papaya sings on the *getai* stage alone. The ghost of Little Papaya is amongst the audience, singing with her. She then joins Big Papaya on stage. The movie closes with Guan Yin taking photos of the "sisters" performing on stage and reviewing pictures of the Papayas in their happier days.

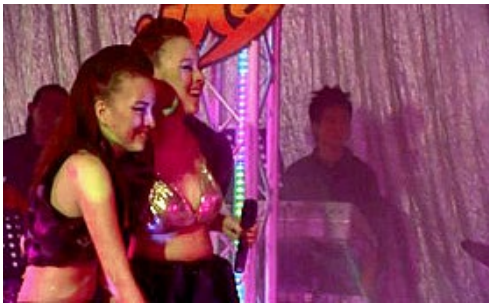
## A Frankfurt School take on 881

Royston Tan's films and his persona as a director have been discussed in Kenneth Paul Tan's recent book, *Cinema and Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension*. In this book, Tan examines Singapore's television and film industries using critical theory from the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School perspective.[37] By projecting Singapore as a Marcusean "one-dimensional society" in which advanced industrial capitalism becomes a totalitarian force, Tan argues,

"Even the art-house variety of films by Eric Khoo and Royston Tan are ultimately susceptible to being drawn into the logic of advanced



Aunt Ling leads the Papaya Sisters in a Chinese voodoo ritual that is supposed to curse the Durian Sisters, but she regrets her malice and they end up chanting blessings for the Durians instead.



The Durian Sisters throw ...



... flower darts (that resemble those in *wuxia* films) ...

capitalist-industrial society. In one-dimensional society, any thought, or cultural product that purports to critique the system is either exiled as dangerous or transformed and rechanneled into forms that ultimately support the system, even if they remain ostensibly critical of it. In one-dimensional Singapore, instances of real critical thinking can be quickly neutered, absorbed into the system, and transformed profitably into docile commodities that serve the system.”[38]

Despite being seen as an iconoclast whose earlier films tend to resist the conventional image of Singapore as a clean, affluent and disciplined society, Kenneth Paul Tan asserts that Royston Tan can also be easily co-opted into the dominant system, whereby his films are able to serve the commercial strategy of Raintree Pictures in producing exportable films.[39]

One of the five co-investors of *881*, Raintree Pictures, is the filmmaking arm of Mediacorp, a state-owned media company that holds a monopoly on free-to-air television in Singapore. Raintree Pictures is known for its overtly commercial strategy in producing films that would appeal to the international viewer in regional and global markets beyond Singapore. While Raintree Pictures regularly produces commercial films rooted in local culture that would appeal to the masses in Singapore, it also produces a number of local films with an arthouse feel, such as *Chicken Rice War* (2000) and *The Tree* (2001).[40] Raintree’s past attempts to break into the regional market have involved artistic co-productions with Hong Kong using actors and directors from Hong Kong along with Singaporean talents, as well as financing high-profile Hong Kong movies such as *Infernal Affairs II* (2003).[41]

Raintree Pictures saw in *881* “an imagery that enables Singapore to package itself as an oriental product for the consumption of a fascinated audience of international commercial art cinema.”[42] In *881*, the Papaya Sisters and Durian Sisters are dressed in outlandish stage costumes that include short Japanese yukatas with geisha hairdos, Native Indian headpieces, Afro wigs, and Thai classical dance costumes oddly mixed with peacock feathers. As Daniel Yun, the CEO of Raintree Pictures, says, “I think (*881*) will be *exotically appealing* to a lot of people around the world.” [43]

Kenneth Paul Tan accuses *881* as an exercise in self-exoticization, one that packages the *getai* popular culture of working-class Singaporeans into an orientalist spectacle for bourgeois arthouse audiences.[44] If we are to analyse *881* from this perspective, it would appear that the film extends a trend that Olivia Khoo has observed of films such as *Mee Pok Man*, *12 Storeys* and *15*, that is, the “reproduction of an aesthetics of the poor in Asian cinema for the pleasure of international film festival audiences.”[45]

Although *881* contains exotic images that appeal to international arthouse audiences, its primary target audience is still ordinary Singaporeans. Kenneth Paul Tan’s analysis only covers the political economy of the production of *881* and fails to explain the popular reception of the movie among heartlanders in Singapore. By setting up Singapore as an ideal-typical one-dimensional society, Tan’s account forecloses any debate on the potential of *881* in resisting hegemonic representations of the working class and subverting hierarchical



... at the Papaya Sisters.

binary oppositions. I argue that we need to understand the transgressive qualities of *881* in terms of the various moments of contradiction in the film, as well as its generic features as a musical.

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The Durians challenge the Papayas to a singing duel on the last day of the seventh month. The losers will have to retire from the *getai* circuit forever.



Guan Yin sells his beloved cock, so that his mother can have money to sew stage costumes for the Papayas, in preparation for the battle against the Durians.



With its core elements of song, dance, performance and revelry, the musical film embodies Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. According to Bakhtin, the carnival refers to popular-festive forms of activity during which social order, hierarchy and authority are suspended and inverted.[46] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] When Royston Tan makes a musical about *getai* performances during the Hungry Ghost Festival, it further incorporates the Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque which has been closely associated with the spirit of the carnival. During the Hungry Ghost Festival, the working-class crowds gathered at outdoor concerts (*getai*) enter into the carnival mode of festivity, community and laughter (the *getai* hosts are fond of cracking dirty jokes). At the same time, the objective of the festival — to entertain ghosts released from Hell — is associated with death and taboo. As Bakhtin has written in his book *Rabelais and His World*, the essence of the grotesque is ambivalence towards life and death.[47] Bakhtin further explains:

"The grotesque...discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. ...This bodily participation in the potentiality of another world, the bodily awareness of another world has an immense importance for the grotesque."[48]

In the same way, *getai* audiences acknowledge that they are watching the performances together with ghosts; the front row seats of the *getai* concert are left empty — supposedly reserved for the ghosts.[49]

Therefore, the spirit of carnivalesque and its oppositional impulses are already invested in both the genre and subject matter of the film *881*. It thus allows Royston Tan to engage in a critique of prevailing hierarchies of gender and class in Singapore, while operating within the confines of mainstream commercial cinema.

### The unruly woman in 881: subverting the gender hierarchy

After watching *881*, that which leaves the deepest impression for the audience is its theme of sisterhood — the intimate and intense emotional bond between Big Papaya and Little Papaya, and Aunt Ling's care and support towards the Papaya Sisters, celebrate a form of female solidarity. And the sisterhood in *881* is one that can be potentially empowering as it is supposed to exclude men in their emotional lives, since the Papaya Sisters are to abstain from love and physical intimacy with men if they are to receive the gift of powerful voices from the Goddess of *Getai*. The sworn-sister relationship between Big Papaya and Little Papaya mirrors the relationship between Aunt Ling and her twin sister, the Goddess of *Getai*. In both cases, the sisterhood is temporarily broken, but finally reconciled. Big Papaya betrays the sisterhood when she kisses Guan Yin, shortly after Little Papaya reminds her that they have promised the Goddess not to let any man touch them. Aunt Ling and the Goddess have stopped talking to each other for 20 years because both have fallen in love with the same man. They finally stop bickering, and are able to face each other and their past. As for Little Papaya, she forgives Big Papaya for violating her vows, and remains united with

Aunt Ling and the Papaya Sisters visit the *Getai* Goddess at her temple again.



The *Getai* Goddess gives the Papaya Sisters more divine powers by casting a spell on them.



In the conversation between Aunt Ling and *Getai* Goddess, it is revealed that both women have fallen in love with Guan Yin's father. Aunt Ling sheepishly confesses that Guan Yin is the son she has conceived with the man whom her sister also loves.



The Durian Sisters seduce the crowds on the night of the singing duel.

Big Papaya in singing (after death).

In the film, the Papaya Sisters converse mostly in Mandarin, whereas Aunt Ling speaks Hokkien and a smattering of Cantonese, another southern Chinese dialect. On the other hand, Guan Yin, the main male character in *881*, is a mute. Although Guan Yin is dumb, he is not truly reduced to silence. The movie opens with Guan Yin (played by Qi Yuwu) "narrating" the backgrounds of the Papaya Sisters with his "internal voice" (as he is a mute), as a sort of prologue to the story. His "internal voice" as voiceover provides a running commentary on the Papaya Sisters' lives throughout the movie. He articulates their feelings:

"The Papaya Sisters loved each other; it's a love that will keep them together."

"Little Papaya's body was failing, but she said nothing."

In addition, the "voice" of Guan Yin in the movie is not the voice of the actor Qi Yuwu, but the voice of the director Royston Tan. It appears that the working-class women in the film are *spoken for* by the working-class male protagonist and the male director. The following comment by Guan Yin in one of the scenes in *881* is most telling: "I don't know if it happens to every *getai* singer. On the stage, the songs are irresistibly powerful. But in real life, there is only silence."

In a media interview, Royston Tan explains, "Through (Guan Yin), I put myself in the movie. It is my perspective — what I see and interpret of the local *getai* scene." [50] The story of the female *getai* performers is therefore presented to the audience through the eyes of Guan Yin. This is further reinforced by scenes in which Guan Yin takes pictures of the Papaya Sisters when they are performing on stage. Towards the end of the movie, Guan Yin is seen taking photos of Big Papaya and the "ghost" of Little Papaya on stage, and then looking at old photos of happier times when the two sisters perform together.

On the surface, the women in *881* are subject to the controlling male gaze of the male protagonist (Guan Yin) and the director. The character of Guan Yin, however, is far more complex and ambiguous than being merely the screen surrogate of the male director looking into the lives of the Papaya Sisters. Throughout the film, Guan Yin is dressed in tight-fitting singlets and shirts intended to show off the lean, taut, muscular physique of actor Qi Yuwu. Because he cannot speak, his body thus becomes an erotic object to be gazed at, by female spectators and gay male audiences. "Guan Yin" in Mandarin is literally translated as "shutting out sound," but it also sounds like the name of the Goddess of Mercy worshipped by Chinese. The goddess Guan Yin (also known as Kuan Yin) originates from a Buddhist deity in India, which entered China with male attributes, but was later transformed into female form. [51] Although Guan Yin in *881* takes on the male form in corporal appearance, he is simultaneously a symbol of queerness that threatens the hegemonic dichotomy between male and female in society.



The Papaya Sisters are late, but finally make their grand entrance in



The Durian Sisters shoot "laser beams" from their "durian bras."



the costumes of classical Thai dancers.



The Papaya Sisters try to counter the “force” but Big Papaya finds that she is unable to summon her divine powers. Little Papaya manages to fend off the Durians by herself, but her nose begins to bleed.



The Durians have not been defeated. They re-emerge after another change of costumes, and shoot another round of lasers at the Papayas.



The Papayas collapse to the ground. Big Papaya tries to reach out her hand to touch Little Papaya.



Blood flows from Little Papaya’s mouth, like swordsmen who sustain “internal injuries” after a battle in a *wuxia* film.

There is another textual element in 881 that destabilizes the gender hierarchy of male over female, and that is the insertion of the character of Aunt Ling. Aunt Ling is a fat seamstress who sews the Papaya Sisters’ stage costumes and gives them emotional support throughout their singing career. She houses Big Papaya in her own home when Big Papaya’s mother chases her daughter out of the house. When the Papaya Sisters get into a catfight with the Durian Sisters at one of the *getai* shows, Aunt Ling rushes in to break the fight and chastise the Durian Sisters’ sugar daddy. Not only is she loud and fat, Aunt Ling constantly provides comic relief in the movie, for instance she misuses the word “techno” to describe a cat on the street, and constantly jokes about how sexually obsessed Guan Yin’s father was. Furthermore, Guan Yin often plays with a pet cock and Aunt Ling continually teases her son about his “cock,” generating a kind of in-your-face bawdiness in the film. When lewd jokes are being made by a woman, it disturbs conventional notions of men directing dirty jokes at women, and temporarily unsettles the social hierarchy.[52]



Press reports of how the *getai* audiences are touched by the sisterly love between the Papayas.

In other words, Aunt Ling exemplifies the figure of the fat unruly woman that have been present in popular culture ranging from Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, Miss Piggy of *The Muppet Show*, and Roseanne Barr-Arnold, star of ABC sitcom *Roseanne*. [53] In her book *The Unruly Woman: Gender and Genres of Laughter*, Kathleen Rowe identifies some significant qualities of the unruly woman in popular culture. Rowe notes that the unruly woman “creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate men;” her body is fat and her speech is “excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.” [54] In addition, the unruly woman is a joke-maker and her behaviour is associated with whorishness or loose sexual





Little Papaya is hospitalized. Big Papaya begs the *Getai* Goddess to save Little Papaya, confessing that she has violated the rules given by the goddess.



At the hospital, Big Papaya wants to explain to Little Papaya that she has kissed Guan Yin. Little Papaya hushes her and tells her, "Just be happy." Little Papaya smiles and promises that she will always sing together with Big Papaya.



The Papaya Sisters embrace each other and begin to sing together. The camera revolves round the two girls as they hug each other, and at every turn...

morals.[55]

Although Rowe's discussion of the fat unruly woman is confined to literary and television characters from Western history and culture, the figure of the fat comedienne is nonetheless familiar to the Chinese audiences in Singapore, the most famous being the late Lydia Sum, a television host and actress from Hong Kong who was invited to act in the Singaporean television sitcom *Living with Lydia* in 2003. Lydia Sum was known for her body weight and domineering personality in Hong Kong showbiz. Similarly, Liu Ling Ling, who plays Aunt Ling in *881*, has been a veteran host in the getai circuit for more than 30 years. Her fans like her because she accepts her weight and is not afraid of to make jokes about her large size.[56] She reprises her stage persona of the fat unruly woman in her role as Aunt Ling in *881*, functioning as the perfect foil to the melodramatic heroines represented by the Papaya Sisters.

## 881 and the genre of the Mandarin musical

For working-class women such as Little Papaya and Aunt Ling, they exist at the lower rungs of society with little hope of access to material wealth and success. At the beginning of the movie, Little Papaya is seen sitting at her fruit stall in the market, smoking and staring into space. Thus becoming famous *getai* singers is a dream that Little Papaya and Big Papaya seek to pursue, one that gives them a possible route out of alienation and meaninglessness. As the press release for the film puts it, the *getai* "with all its pomp and pageantry is a respite from the emptiness and dreariness of (the Papaya Sisters') own lives." [57]

*881* is reminiscent of an earlier Singaporean film directed by Glen Goei, known as *Forever Fever* (1998), which was picked up by Miramax and released in the United States as *That's the Way I Like It*. Set in 1978 Singapore, *Forever Fever* was about a grocery clerk, Hock, who idolized Bruce Lee and joined a disco competition in order to win cash for buying a motorcycle. Hock incorporated kungfu moves into his dance and won the first prize in the disco competition. [58] While *Forever Fever* was inspired by John Badham's 1977 musical *Saturday Night Fever* and would find resonance amongst international audiences with its soundtrack of disco hits such as *Kung Fu Fighting* and *Staying Alive*, [59] *881* has more in common with the Mandarin musical by employing the familiar figure of the ill-fated songstress, which has endured through Chinese cinema since the 1930s.

In his book *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*, Stephen Teo has explained that the precursor of the modern Mandarin musical (*gewu pian* or *gechang pian*) was the *chaqu pian*. [60] *Chaqu pian* were typically melodramas or comedies with songs inserted into the narrative, sung by the lead actress, who often played the role of a songstress suffering in a tragic life (such as a nightclub singer). [61] Zhou Xuan, one of the earliest singing stars in Chinese cinema in the 1930s to 1940s, personified the "sing-song girl" archetype with films such as *Street Angel* / *Malu Tianshi* (1937) and *Song of a Songstress* / *Genü Zhige* (1948). [62] In the 1950s, the Mandarin musical genre changed from the *chaqu pian* format to the *gechang pian* format, and the latter was to bear a closer resemblance to Western musicals. [63] The queen of *gechang pian* was undoubtedly Grace Chang, also known as Ge Lan, who was well-known for her brilliant dancing skills in *Mambo Girl* / *Manbo Nülang* (1957), and for her role as a feisty nightclub singer in *The Wild Wild Rose* / *Ye Meigui Zhi Lian* (1960), a film that was loosely adapted from Bizet's *Carmen*. [64]



...Little Papaya's hair falls off, until...



...she finally dies in the arms of Big Papaya.

Popular Mandarin songs sung by Grace Chang continue to be remembered with fondness today and is still being referenced in Chinese cinema, the most notable example being Tsai Ming-Liang's *The Hole / Dong* (1998). *The Hole* features a man and a woman living in two apartments separated by a hole in the ceiling, surviving a virus fever that has overrun Taipei City. The movie highlights the urban alienation experienced by the Taiwanese, but provides a refreshing take on Tsai's favourite theme by including fantasy song-and-dance sequences set to five musical numbers by Grace Chang, such as *I Want Your Love / Wo Yao Ni De Ai* (adapted from Georgia Gibbs' *I Want You To Be My Baby*), *I Love Calypso / Wo Ai Ka Li Su* (from the Mandarin musical *Air Hostess / Kongzhong Xiaojie* in 1958) and *I Don't Care Who You Are / Bu Guan Ni Shi Shui* (from *The Loving Couple / Xin Xin Xiang Yin* starring Grace Chang in 1960).[65]

Royston Tan's 2001 short film *Hock Hiap Leong* has been regarded as a tribute to *The Hole*. The movie is about a young man who laments the imminent demolition of a 55-year-old coffeeshop. It also references Grace Chang's *I Love Cha Cha / Wo Ai Qia Qia* (from *Mambo Girl*) in a dreamy song-and-dance segment with gaudy costumes and feather boas, transporting the coffee shop to the 1960s.[66] Although both *Hock Hiap Leong* and *Cut* employed camp effects for critique of public policy, the length of these short films has not allowed Royston Tan to reflect upon more deep-seated fault lines in Singapore society, and it was until 881 that Royston Tan could exploit the musical genre more fully.

As a film set in contemporary Singapore, *881* evokes nostalgia for the Mandarin musical in a more subtle way. Some of the *getai* costumes worn by the Papaya Sisters, such as the silver cabaret-style leotards and feather headdresses, are reminiscent of performance costumes in the Shaw Brothers Mandarin musical *Hong Kong Nocturne / Xiangjiang Hua Yue Ye* (1967) and its follow-up film *Hong Kong Rhapsody / Hua Yue Liang Xiao* (1968).[67] Both films were directed by Japanese director Inoue Umetsugu, and were among the last few Mandarin musicals before Hong Kong cinema was dominated by martial arts films in the 1970s.[68]

As Stephen Teo has pointed out, the romantic male leads in Mandarin musicals of the 1950s to 1960s tended to be weak and effeminate, playing supportive roles to the stronger female characters.[69] Similarly, in *881*, Guan Yin is relegated to a supportive role — when the Papaya Sisters perform, Guan Yin is not the male partner dancing on stage with them. He is better remembered as a chauffeur for the Papayas and an errand-boy for Aunt Ling. As a mute he does not speak; although his internal voice narrates the story and feelings of the Papaya Sisters, he gives little explanation of his own emotions and romantic (and perhaps sexual) interest in the Papaya Sisters. In contrast to the silence of Guan Yin, the voices of women singing Hokkien songs pervade the movie — the Papaya Sisters singing Hokkien numbers during their *getai* performances, Aunt Ling breaking out into a sad Hokkien song as she sews the Papaya Sisters' stage costumes, Big Papaya's mother (a former *getai* singer) singing a heart-wrenching Hokkien song to express how she misses her daughter after she drives Big Papaya out of her home.



In the year that follows, Big Papaya sings alone at *getai* concerts.



The “spirit” of Little Papaya is among the *getai* audience, standing next to Big Papaya’s mother.



The ghost of Little Papaya joins Big Papaya on stage.

Indeed, the Hokkien songs in *881* are a central component of the film’s success. The film’s soundtrack was sold out upon release, and one of the songs in the soundtrack was amongst the 100 most viewed video clips on YouTube.[70] The Hokkien songs featured in the film include traditional *getai* songs adapted from Hokkien oldies such as *Spring Breeze* / *Wang Chunfeng* and *Xue Mei Dreams of a Gentleman* / *Xuemei Sijun* (originally a Hokkien opera excerpt). Some tracks are songs made famous by the late *getai* singer Chen Jinlang, such as *The Last Breath* / *Zuihou Yikouqi* (written by Chen) and *The Wayward Son at His Mother’s Funeral* / *Langzi Song Qinniang* (adapted from the Hokkien opera excerpt *Five Drums Before Dawn* / *Wu Geng Gu*). Chen’s songs describe his feelings when he was in jail, as well as the pain he experienced when he suffered from cancer.

[Go to page 4](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Guan Yin takes photographs offstage.



The movie ends with Guan Yin looks at the photos of the Papaya Sisters in happier times.



This is followed by a dream / fantasy sequence of Little Papaya in a glittering white getai costume, sitting on a crescent moon “in heaven.”

The working-class females in this film do not only speak, but sing, in Hokkien. Hokkien has been a “suppressed language” in Singapore,[71][[open endnotes in new window](#)] because the Singapore government designates Mandarin (based on northern Chinese dialect) as the official language for the ethnic Chinese community in the country. Chinese immigrants in colonial Singapore were mostly from southern China and spoke a variety of dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, Hainanese and so on. Mandarin was not their native tongue, and Hokkien was the dialect with the largest number of native speakers amongst Chinese Singaporeans.[72] In 1979, the government launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to adopt Mandarin as the common language in the Chinese community. Hokkien, along with other dialects, was thus banned in television and radio in Singapore. Television dramas and movies imported from Hong Kong and Taiwan had to be dubbed in Mandarin, from Cantonese and Hokkien respectively.[73]

The existing linguistic hierarchy in Singapore is such that English, being the official language for business and public administration, offers its speakers the greatest economic and political advantage; Mandarin is the official “ethnic language” for Chinese Singaporeans but is considered of little importance to educational and career achievement; while Chinese dialects are systematically marginalized.[74] The annual Speak Mandarin Campaign has been running for the past 30 years, and the Mandarin policy is so successful that the younger generation of Chinese Singaporeans (below 25 years old) have lost the ability to converse in Hokkien.[75]

From the 1990s onwards, dialects were allowed for artistic purposes in certain films and theatre productions,[76] as they no longer threatened the status of Mandarin. Although Hokkien has never been prohibited in everyday speech, it has now been “reduced to a language of the lowest-educated section of the working class and the illiterate,”[77] typically used when ordinary Singaporeans order food in the local coffee shops or from food hawkers.

Press discourse surrounding *881* credited the movie for reviving the dying Hokkien language in Singapore, as it had sparked interest in Hokkien music and *getai* concerts amongst young people in Singapore.[78] Part of the appeal of the film, therefore, lies in its “Hokkiennes.” In fact, *881* follows after the commercial success of Jack Neo’s *Money No Enough* and *I Not Stupid*, both of which are known for heavy use of Hokkien in the films’ dialogue. Chua Beng Huat has pointed out in a media interview that using Hokkien in films creates a “rebellious effect” for it signifies a “return of the repressed.”[79] The viewing pleasure of the audience (especially if they are Hokkien-speaking heartlanders) is heightened when they hear a suppressed language such as Hokkien being spoken in a locally-produced film.[80]

However, in Jack Neo’s box-office hits, the adult males speak Hokkien and Mandarin, while the main female characters are middle-class and Mandarin-speaking. With Royston Tan’s *881*, the Singaporean working-class female is finally able to break her silence in the realm of popular cinema, through the singing of Papaya Sisters and Aunt Ling’s extensive use of Hokkien in the film. The film places the Mandarin speakers and dialect speakers in alliance, and emphasizes their struggle against the English-speaking Singaporeans,



Is 881 an exercise in self-exotization? The Papaya Sisters dressed in short Japanese yukatas, flanked by traditional Chinese lion dancers, during their battle with the Durian Sisters.



Aunt Ling as the fat unruly woman, thrusting her pelvis and laughing in a comic dance to cheer Big Papaya up, after the latter is banished from home.



Aunt Ling, the jokemaker, calls a stray cat in the streets “techno cat” when the animal ignores her. Aunt Ling misuses English words as she is not proficient in English.

reiterating a theme that has run through Jack Neo’s *Money No Enough, I Not Stupid* and *I Not Stupid Too*, as well as Royston Tan’s 15.

The local Chinese community in Singapore is bifurcated between the Chinese-educated / Chinese-speaking and the English-educated / English-speaking. Such a division was a result of the co-existence of English-medium schools and vernacular schools in Singapore during the colonial days. The vernacular schools for the Chinese, Malay and Indian students were important institutions in maintaining ethnic identities and boundaries.[81]

After independence in 1965, the Singapore government established integrated schools which housed students from different language streams within the same compound, and introduced compulsory bilingual education for primary and secondary schools. All students were required to study two languages, English and their “mother tongue,” that is Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays and Tamils for the Indians.

At present there is still a divide between the English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans, and the Chinese-speaking Singaporeans who speak Mandarin and dialects. As English is the official language for government and business, the English-educated / English-speaking have access to better jobs with higher pay, and appear to be the elite occupying key positions in government. However, the Chinese-speaking community still constitute the majority, as Mandarin and dialects are still the most frequently used languages at home for 70% of the Chinese.[82] The Chinese-speaking community is further subdivided into a few groups: a) a small number of highly-educated bilingual Chinese who are well-versed in both English and Chinese languages, and are still able to secure well-paid jobs; b) older Singaporeans who were educated in Chinese-medium schools before the 1980s; and c) dialect-speaking Chinese who do not understand English. The second group experience frustration and resentment towards being discriminated in employment and being excluded from the ruling class, while the third group belong to the poor alienated underclass.[83]

In 881, the *getai* battle between the Mandarin-speaking Papaya Sisters and the English-speaking Durian Sisters is an allegory for the long-standing tension between the Mandarin / dialect speaking Chinese and the English-speaking Chinese in Singapore. By extension, it is also an allegory for the class-based contradiction between the working-class heartlanders and the middle-class English-speaking cosmopolitans. Contrary to expectations, the Papaya Sisters do not triumph in their singing duel against the Durians — Big Papaya loses her divine power and Little Papaya collapses from her illness. Royston Tan holds no fantasy that in reality, the English-speaking will still remain dominant in socio-economic position in Singapore society.

But the musical genre has three fictional worlds that are closely intertwined: the stage, the dream, and the “real” world; the stage and the dream world allow the free expression of fantasies and emotions that are not possible in the “real” world.[84] Hence Little Papaya is resurrected as a ghost at the end of the film, and goes on stage to sing together with Big Papaya. The final scene shows Guan Yin looking at the photographs of the Papaya Sisters and going into a reverie, leading into a fantasy sequence of Little Papaya dressed in a glittering white performing costume, sitting on a crescent moon in “heaven.” In the “real” world, the Mandarin-speaking have lost the battle, but in the dream world the resilience and the determination of the oppressed lives on.

Of course, it is easy for critics to say that this is merely an instance of symbolic resistance from the working class, rather than real social change for the subordinate groups in society, just as Jane Feuer has commented on the genre



of the Hollywood musical,



Zhou Xuan, in her most famous songstress role in *Street Angel* (1937).



Ge Lan as Kailing, a cheerful student from a middle-class family, in the Cathay / MP & GI musical *Mambo Girl* (1957). Kailing later finds out that she is actually an orphan adopted by her foster parents, and her biological mother works in a nightclub.



Yang Guimei, who plays the main female character in *The Hole* (directed by Tsai Ming-liang, 1998). In this fantasy sequence she is dancing in a lift, to Ge Lan's song *I Love Calypso*. The movie is a tribute to Ge Lan's songs, as the film closes with a

"... the musical presents its vision of the unfettered human spirit in a way that forecloses a desire to translate that vision into reality. The Hollywood version of Utopia is entirely solipsistic. In its endless reflexivity the musical can offer only itself, only entertainment as its picture of Utopia." [85]

Yet such a judgment of the musical genre fails to take into account that musicals could have implications for liberation in the realm of personal politics, and the deeper consciousness towards class conflict generated by the themes of musicals. [86] Furthermore, Chuck Kleinhans has argued that we should not ignore small commonplace acts of resistance, for they are the starting-point for the cultivation of solidarity amongst the subordinated classes. Kleinhans explains this in terms of the subversive potential of the slave plantation cakewalk in the United States:

"Of course the original slave plantation cakewalk didn't change the fact of slavery, and of course it didn't overthrow it, but it did grant a group solidarity, a humor and bonding in the face of adversity and oppression, and this is no small thing. Such social bonding is the fertile ground of resistance. There is a tendency to dismiss such everyday forms of resistance to oppression. But to do so loses sight of the importance of small forms, the familiar expressions of consciousness." [87]

Royston Tan himself is from a working-class background — his parents are food hawkers who speak in Mandarin and Hokkien. [88] Tan is the proverbial working-class boy made good, as he has managed to garner critical acclaim at various international film festivals as a director. Royston Tan has called *881* "a celebration of tackiness and tacky music and tacky fashion," [89] even though terms such as "tacky" and "kitsch" are employed by the middle-classes to denigrate the cultural products and styles associated with the working-class. [90]

As Chuck Kleinhans has pointed out in his 1994 essay, people from subordinate classes often borrow symbols, words and styles from the dominant class only to turn these elements around to mock at the beliefs, values and practices of the powerful groups in society. [91] In the same way, when Royston Tan says that his film celebrates "tackiness," it is an act of cultural appropriation. By dressing the Papaya Sisters in feather-laden and loud-coloured stage costumes, which could be decoded as excessive and tasteless by the middle-class, Royston Tan is also mocking at the "stuffiness" and pretentiousness of the middle class in their preference for more discreet styles in fashion. In another scene where Guan Yin and the Papaya Sisters are eating at a coffee shop at night, Big Papaya sits with her legs wide apart in a deliberately vulgar act that seeks to offend middle-class standards of propriety.

The film *881* is also a vehicle in which Royston Tan challenges hegemonic discourses of the working class in society. In her book *Class, Self, Culture*, Beverley Skeggs has discussed how the working class has often been represented as unmodern by the elites, with spatial fixity (or the quality of not being *mobile*) functioning as a signifier of the unmodernity of the working-class. [92] For example, living in public housing estates or residing in a certain district automatically marks a person as working-class, and working-class persons are named by the locations they come from. This is already employed by the Singapore government in designating the working-class as heartlanders, as those who are living in public housing estates, who can only make their living in



statement from Tsai Ming-liang: "The year 2000 is coming, we are thankful that Ge Lan's songs are still with us."



Another song-and-dance segment in *The Hole*, with Yang Guimei dancing in the hallway to Ge Lan's *I Want Your Love*. Yang hugs a fire extinguisher and dances tango with it, signifying the loneliness and isolation of urban dwellers in Taipei.

Singapore. The geographical fixity of the heartlanders is then contrasted with the mobility of the well-educated cosmopolitans who are comfortable working and living anywhere in the world.

*881* plays upon this image of the spatially fixed and immobile heartlander. The Papaya Sisters have to rush from one *getai* stage to another in various locations in Singapore. Guan Yin drives the girls around as they move from one *getai* to the next. As Guan Yin's car drives on, blocks and blocks of HDB flats recede from view as Guan Yin drives past them, and the blocks never seem to end. No matter where and how much the Papaya Sisters move, their movement does not in any way alter their location in the "real" world. They are merely moving from one HDB residential district to another; they will never be able to leave Singapore. They are merely moving from one *getai* to another, but working as *getai* singers will not move them upward in the socio-economic hierarchy. However, on the *getai* stage (the sphere of fantasy in the musical), the Papaya Sisters can "travel around the world" through dressing up in costumes from different cultures, such as Japanese yukatas and Native American headdresses, thus undermining the discourse of immobility of working-class people.

Not only has *881* been able to appeal to the masses in Singapore, it has also attracted the attention and enjoyment of the English-speaking middle-class cosmopolitans, allowing the latter to take a closer look at the *getai* culture of the Hokkien-speaking working-class, which has hitherto been marginalized and ignored. This is no mean feat in itself. But one must note that curiosity and interest towards *getai* culture amongst movie audiences does not always last very long. Royston Tan released another movie in 2008, *12 Lotus*, as a follow-up film to *881*. *12 Lotus* is another melodramatic musical film about a *getai* singer who is abused by cruel and heartless men throughout her life. The film only managed to gross about US\$681,924 at the box office, compared to *881* which took in more than S\$3 million (approximately US\$1.96 million).[93] We will have to wait and see if the bad boy of Singaporean cinema returns to more controversial topics in his next feature film.



Lily Ho, Cheng Pei Pei and Chin Ping as the three sisters in the Shaw Brothers Mandarin musical *Hong Kong Nocturne* (1967). The Papaya Sisters in *881* wear similar feathery headdresses.



Another scene from *Hong Kong Nocturne*, with the three sisters in top hats and cabaret costumes.



In *881*, the Papayas perform with rapid costume changes during their battle with the Durians. Here they are wearing black-and-white top hats.



Li Ching, the lead actress in *Hong Kong Rhapsody* (1968), another Shaw Brothers musical.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

1. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association International Conference: Vision, Memory and Spectacle, July 9-12, 2008, Perth, Australia. I would like to thank Dr. Leonie Stickland and Ms. Marilyn Metta for their comments on the paper. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. Raphaël Millet, *Singapore Cinema* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), 10; Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press with Ngee Ann Polytechnic, 2000), 1-25.
3. Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, 28-31.
4. Kenneth Paul Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension* (The Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 41-44.
5. Chua Beng Huat and Yeo Wei Wei, "Singapore cinema: Eric Khoo and Jack Neo — critique from the margins and the mainstream," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no.1 (2003): 117-125; Ho Tzu Nyen, "The afterimage — traces of otherness in recent Singaporean cinema," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no.2 (2007): 310-326; Olivia Khoo, "Slang images: on the foreignness of contemporary Singaporean films," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no.1 (2006): 81-98; Michael Lee, "Dead Man Gazing: Posthumous Voyeurism in *12 Storeys*, or 'Splacing Singapore's Official and Unofficial Discourses?'" *Asian Cinema* 11, no.2 (2000): 99-132; Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 145-252; Tan See Kam, Michael Lee, and Annette Aw, "Contemporary Singapore filmmaking: history, policies and Eric Khoo," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 46 (2003), (accessed June 5, 2008).  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/12storeys/text.html>
6. Douglas Tseng, "The Superpower of Sequels," *The Straits Times*, January 19, 2008.
7. Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 238-247.
8. Ibid., 250.
9. The New Paper, "100 Getai Videos Posted On Youtube," *The Electric New Paper*, August 27, 2007, under "Mini Documentary,"



<http://tnp.sg/printfriendly/0,4139,139987,00.html> (accessed January 21, 2008).

10. Hong Xinyi, "Hokkien Heavenly King," *The Straits Times*, August 12, 2007, (accessed July 5, 2008).  
[http://www.straitstimes.com/Free/Story/STIStory\\_147582.html](http://www.straitstimes.com/Free/Story/STIStory_147582.html)
11. Straits Times Online Mobile Print(STOMP), "Getai A-Go-Go," STOMP Website (accessed July 6, 2008),  
<http://getai.stomp.com.sg/getai/index.jsp>
12. Tseng, "The Superpower of Sequels."
13. Zhao Wei Films, "881 — Festivals," Zhao Wei Films, (accessed July 21, 2008).  
<http://www.zhaowei.com/881/festivals.html>
14. The New Paper, "Royston's more famous in Korea than Singapore," *The Electric New Paper*, October 11, 2007 (accessed February 21, 2009).<http://newpaper.asia1.com.sg/printfriendly/0,4139,144493,00.html>
15. Singapore Department of Statistics, *Singapore in Figures 2008* (Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics, 2008) (accessed February 21, 2009), 5.,  
<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/reference/sif2008.pdf>
16. Ibid., 1.
17. Housing Development Board, "A brief background — HDB's beginnings," Housing Development Board (accessed June 17, 2008).  
[http://www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10296p.nsf/WPDis/About%20UsA%20Brief%20Background%20-%20HDB's%20Beginnings?OpenDocument&SubMenu=A\\_Brief\\_Background](http://www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10296p.nsf/WPDis/About%20UsA%20Brief%20Background%20-%20HDB's%20Beginnings?OpenDocument&SubMenu=A_Brief_Background)
18. Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 68.
19. Chua Beng Huat and Eddie C.Y. Kuo, "The making of a new nation: cultural construction and national identity," in Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy*, 116.
20. Chang Han-Yin, "Singapore: Education and Change of Class Stratification," *Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 4 (1995): 456.
21. Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister's National Day Rally Speech: First-World Economy, World Class Home, August 27, 1999, under "Bonding Cosmopolitans and Heartlanders," (accessed June 17, 2008).  
<http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/viewHTML.jsp?pdfno=1999082202>
22. Ibid. In this quotation, Singlish refers to a form of pidgin English widely spoken by Singaporeans. It is a mixture of English, Malay and Chinese dialects, especially Hokkien.

23. Elaine Ho Lynn-Ee, "Negotiating belonging and perceptions of citizenship in a transnational world: Singapore, a cosmopolis?" *Social & Cultural Geography* 7, no. 3 (2006): 388-89.
24. Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy*, 14-16; 141.
25. Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 194-195; Tan et al., "Contemporary Singapore filmmaking," under "Unorthodoxies of Eric Khoo's early films."
26. Tan et al., "Contemporary Singapore filmmaking," under "Unorthodoxies of Eric Khoo's early films."
27. Chua and Yeo, "Singapore cinema," 120.
28. Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, 127.
29. Chua and Yeo, "Singapore cinema," 124.
30. Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 150-159. [[return to page 2](#)]
31. Ho, "The afterimage," 315-19.
32. Kyle Minor, "Dispatches from the 2004 Sundance Film Festival: Day 3," McSweeneys.net (accessed February 21, 2009).  
<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/links/sundance/day3.html>
33. Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 213-14.
34. Felicia Chan, "When is a foreign-language film not a foreign-language film? When it has too much English in it: The case of a Singapore film and the Oscars," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 9, no.1 (2008): 101.
35. Ho, "The afterimage," 318.
36. Lee Sze Yong, "Girl Power," *The Straits Times*, August 9, 2007 (accessed July 3, 2008),  
<http://www.asiaone.com/print/Wine%252CDine%2B%2526%2BUnwind/Unwind/Showtime/Story/A1Story20070815-22003.html> .
37. The Frankfurt School refers to a group of German theorists known for their criticism towards mass media and cultural production in an advanced capitalist society. The key Frankfurt School theorists included Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin. The Frankfurt School generally held the view that popular culture encouraged conformity to the existing capitalist order and whittled away people's desire to change the system.
38. Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 37.
39. Ibid., 248-252.
40. Millet, *Singapore Cinema*, 93-94.

41. Ibid., 94-95.
42. Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 252.
43. Quoted in Valarie Tan, "Royston Tan to make S\$1 m musical on 'Getai'," Channel News Asia Web Site, February 7, 2007 (accessed December 5, 2007),  
<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/257207/1/.html>.
44. Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 251-252.
45. Khoo, "Slang images," 94.
46. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.
47. Ibid., 24. [[return to page 3](#)]
48. Ibid., 48.
49. Jovanda Biston, "Singapore film on music for dead brings Hokkien to life," *Reuters*, September 1, 2007 (accessed December 16, 2007),  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/sphereNews/idUSSP27516220070901?sp=true&view=sphere>.
50. Quoted in Lee, "Girl Power."
51. John H. Chamberlayne, "The development of Kuan Yin: Chinese Goddess of Mercy," *Numen* 9, no. 1 (1962): 46-48.
52. Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995), 19.
53. Ibid., 26-51.
54. Ibid., 31.
55. Ibid.
56. Lim Lee Choon and Cynthia Oh Shih Chia, "Getai fans and their favorite host: participant observation and in-depth interview" (unpublished manuscript, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2007), 3; 18.
57. Media Development Authority, "881 — A Royston Tan Film," February 7, 2007, under "881 — The Premise," (accessed June 30, 2008)  
<http://www.mda.gov.sg/wms.www.thenewsdesk.aspx?sid=773>.
58. Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, 128-29.
59. Uhde and Uhde, *Latent Images*, 128; Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 219-22.



60. Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 31.
61. Ibid., 30.
62. Ibid., 29-30.
63. Ibid., 34.
64. Ibid.
65. Fran Martin, "Wild Women and Mechanical Men: A Review of *The Hole*," *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 4 (2000), (accessed February 2, 2009).  
<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue4/holereview.html>
66. Millet, *Singapore Cinema*, 111; Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 223.
67. *Hong Kong Nocturne*, starring Cheng Pei Pei and Peter Chen Ho, is about three daughters of a musician, who perform song and dance numbers during their father's magic show. Resentful of their father's womanizing ways, the three girls leave their father to pursue to their own careers, but are eventually reunited with their father after they experience emotional problems and trials. In *Hong Kong Rhapsody*, an orphaned girl, Xiaoping, seeks refuge with her father's friend, a magician called Chen Zixin. In a stormy night, Xiaoping and Zixin take shelter in a vacant mansion, throwing a feast for the poor and destitute. The rich owner of the mansion arrives, but takes a liking towards Xiaoping, as he suspects that Xiaoping is his long-lost grand-daughter. He later sponsors the production of a musical with Xiaoping as the lead performer.
68. Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 35-36.
69. Ibid.
70. Loh Keng Fatt, "881 soundtrack a bestseller," *The Straits Times*, August 31, 2007 (accessed June 30, 2008),  
<http://www.asiaone.com/Wine%252CDine%2B%2526%2BUnwind/Unwind/Music/Story/A1Story20070903-23988.html> ;  
Biston, "Singapore film on music," under "Vanishing."
71. Chua Beng Huat, *Life is not complete without shopping: consumption culture in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), 164.
72. Eddie C. Y. Kuo, "Television and language planning in Singapore," *International Journal of Sociology of Language* 48 (1984): 50. [[return to page 4 of essay](#)]
73. Chua, *Life is not complete*, 169; Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 152.
74. Chua, *Life is not complete*, 168-69.

75. Ibid., 170.
76. Tan, *Cinema and Television in Singapore*, 152.
77. Chua, *Life is not complete*, 169.
78. Biston, "Singapore film on music,"; Loh, "881 soundtrack."
79. Quoted in Biston, "Singapore film on music," under "Rebel Language."
80. Chua, *Life is not complete*, 171.
81. Chiew Seen Kong, "The Socio-cultural Framework of Politics," in *Understanding Singapore Society*, ed. Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, and Tan Ern Ser (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), 87-88.
82. Singapore Department of Statistics, "General Household Survey 2005 Statistical Release 1: Socio-demographic and Economic Characteristics," (accessed February 22, 2009), 17.  
<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/ghsr1/ghs05r1.pdf>
83. Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP's Management of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995), 127-129.
84. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 67-85.
85. Ibid., 84.
86. Jeremy Butler, "The Hollywood Musical: Peel Away the Tinsel," *Jump Cut* 31 (March 1986): 17-18, (accessed February 10, 2009).  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinesays/JC31folder/FeuerMusRev.html>
87. Chuck Kleinhans, "Cultural Appropriation and Subcultural Expression: The Dialectics of Cooptation and Resistance" (paper presented at the Northwestern University Center for the Humanities, Chicago, IL, November 14, 1994), 6.
88. Lee, "Girl Power."
89. Quoted in Channel New Asia, "Royston Tan just can't get enough of numbers," Channel News Asia Web Site, March 13, 2007, (accessed July 6, 2008).  
<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/entertainment/view/263662/1/.html>
90. Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 107-108.
91. Kleinhans, "Cultural Appropriation," 4.
92. Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, 112-13.

93. Box Office Mojo, "Singapore Yearly Box Office 2008," Box Office Mojo, (accessed February 23, 2009)  
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/singapore/yearly/> ;  
Valarie Tan, "MediaCorp Raintree Pictures' '881' crosses S\$3m mark at box office," Channel News Asia Website, September 12, 2007, (accessed June 30, 2008).  
<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/299668/1/.html>

## Works cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iwolsky. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984. Originally published as *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable* (Moscow: Khudozhestvenniia literature, 1965).

Berry, Chris, and Mary Farquhar. *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Biston, Jovanda. "Singapore film on music for dead brings Hokkien to life." *Reuters*, September 1, 2007 (accessed December 16, 2007).  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/sphereNews/idUSSP27516220070901?sp=true&view=sphere> .

Box Office Mojo. "Singapore Yearly Box Office 2008." Box Office Mojo (accessed February 23, 2009).  
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/singapore/yearly/> .

Butler, Jeremy. "The Hollywood Musical: Peel Away the Tinsel." *Jump Cut* 31 (March 1986): 17-18 (accessed February 10, 2009).  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC31folder/FeuerMusRev.html> .

Chamberlayne, John H. "The development of Kuan Yin: Chinese Goddess of Mercy." *Numen* 9, no.1 (1962): 45-52.

Chan, Felicia. "When is a foreign-language film not a foreign-language film? When it has too much English in it: The case of a Singapore film and the Oscars." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2008): 97-105.

Chang, Han-Yin. "Singapore: Education and Change of Class Stratification." *Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 4 (1995): 455-476.

Channel News Asia. "Royston just can't get enough of numbers." Channel News Asia Website, March 13, 2007 (accessed June 7, 2008).  
<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/entertainment/view/263662/1/.html>.

Chiew Seen Kong, "The Socio-cultural Framework of Politics." In *Understanding Singapore Society*, edited by Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, and Tan Ern Ser, 86-106. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997.

Chua, Beng Huat. *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*.



London: Routledge, 1995.

Chua, Beng Huat. *Life is not complete without shopping: consumption culture in Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003.

Chua, Beng Huat, and Eddie C.Y. Kuo. "The making of a new nation: cultural construction and national identity." In *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, by Chua Beng Huat, 101-23. London: Routledge, 1995.

Chua, Beng Huat and Yeo Wei Wei. "Singapore cinema: Eric Khoo and Jack Neo — critique from the margins and the mainstream." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1(2003): 117-25.

Feuer, Jane. *The Hollywood Musical*. 2nd ed. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Goh, Chok Tong. Prime Minister's National Day Rally Speech: First-World Economy, World Class Home, August 27, 1999 (accessed June 17, 2008).  
<http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/viewHTML.jsp?pdfno=1999082202>.

Ho, Elaine Lynn-Ee. "Negotiating belonging and perceptions of citizenship in a transnational world: Singapore, a cosmopolis?" *Social & Cultural Geography* 7, no. 3 (2006): 385-401.

Ho, Tzu Nyen. "The afterimage — traces of otherness in recent Singaporean cinema." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 310-326.

Hong, Xinyi. "Hokkien Heavenly King." *The Straits Times*, August 12, 2007 (accessed July 5, 2008)  
[http://www.straitstimes.com/Free/Story/STIStory\\_147582.html](http://www.straitstimes.com/Free/Story/STIStory_147582.html)

Housing Development Board. "A brief background — HDB's beginnings." Housing Development Board Website (accessed June 17, 2008).  
[http://www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10296p.nsf/WPDis/About%20UsA%20Brief%20Background%20-%20HDB's%20Beginnings?OpenDocument&SubMenu=A\\_Brief\\_Background](http://www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10296p.nsf/WPDis/About%20UsA%20Brief%20Background%20-%20HDB's%20Beginnings?OpenDocument&SubMenu=A_Brief_Background).

Khoo, Olivia. "Slang images: on the foreignness of contemporary Singaporean films." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006): 81-98.

Kleinhans, Chuck. "Cultural Appropriation and Subcultural Expression: The Dialectics of Cooptation and Resistance." Paper presented at the Northwestern University Center for the Humanities, Chicago, IL, November 14, 1994.

Kuo, Eddie C. Y. "Television and language planning in Singapore." *International Journal of Sociology of Language*, 48 (1984): 49-64.

Lee, Michael. (2000). Dead Man Gazing: Posthumous Voyeurism in *12 Storeys*, or "Splacing Singapore's Official and Unofficial Discourses?" *Asian Cinema* 11, no. 2 (2000): 99-132.

Lee, Sze Yong. "Girl Power." *The Straits Times*, August 9, 2007 (accessed July 3,

2008).

<http://www.asiaone.com/print/Wine%252CDine%2B%2526%2BUnwind/Unwind/Showtime/Story/A1Story20070815-22003.html>.

Lim, Lee Choon and Cynthia Oh Shih Chia. "Getai fans and their favorite host: participant observation and in-depth interview." Unpublished manuscript, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2007.

Loh, Keng Fatt. "881 soundtrack a bestseller." *The Straits Times*, August 31, 2007 (accessed June 30, 2008).

<http://www.asiaone.com/Wine%252CDine%2B%2526%2BUnwind/Unwind/Music/Story/A1Story20070903-23988.html>.

Martin, Fran. "Wild Women and Mechanical Men: A Review of *The Hole*." *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 4 (2000) (accessed February 2, 2009).

<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue4/holereview.html>.

Media Development Authority. "881 — A Royston Tan Film." Media Development Authority Website (accessed June 30, 2008).

<http://www.mda.gov.sg/wms.www/thenewsdesk.aspx?sid=773>.

Millet, Raphaël. *Singapore Cinema*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006.

Minor, Kyle. "Dispatches from the 2004 Sundance Film Festival: Day 3." McSweeney's.net (accessed February 21, 2009).

<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/links/sundance/day3.html>.

Rowe, Kathleen. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995.

Singapore Department of Statistics. "General Household Survey 2005 Statistical Release 1: Socio-demographic and Economic Characteristics." (accessed February 22, 2009)

<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/ghsr1/ghso5r1.pdf>.

Singapore Department of Statistics. *Singapore in Figures 2008*. Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics, 2008 (accessed February 21, 2009).

<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/reference/sif2008.pdf>.

Skeggs, Beverley. *Class, Self, Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Straits Times Online Mobile Print(STOMP). "Getai A-Go-Go." STOMP Website (accessed July 6, 2008).

<http://getai.stomp.com.sg/getai/index.jsp>.

Tan, Kenneth Paul. *Cinema and Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension*. The Netherlands: Brill, 2008.

Tan, See Kam, Michael Lee Hong Hwee, and Annette Aw. "Contemporary Singapore filmmaking: history, policies and Eric Khoo." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 46 (2003) (accessed June 5, 2008).

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/12storeys/text.html>.

Tan, Valarie. "Royston Tan to make S\$1 m musical on getai." Channel News Asia Website, February 7, 2007 (accessed December 5, 2007).

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/257207/1/.html>.

Tan, Valarie. "MediaCorp Raintree Pictures' '881' crosses S\$3m mark at box office," Channel News Asia Website, September 12, 2007 (accessed June 30, 2008).

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/299668/1/.html>.

Teo, Stephen. *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*. London: British Film Institute, 1997.

The New Paper. "100 Getai Videos Posted on Youtube." *The Electric New Paper*, August 27, 2007 (accessed January 21, 2008).

<http://tnp.sg/printfriendly/0,4139,139987,00.html>.

The New Paper. "Royston's more famous in Korea than Singapore." *The Electric New Paper*, October 11, 2007 (accessed February 21, 2009).

<http://newpaper.asia1.com.sg/printfriendly/0,4139,144493,00.html>.

Tseng, Douglas. "The Superpower of Sequels." *The Straits Times*, January 19, 2008.

Uhde, Jan, and Yvonne Ng Uhde. *Latent Images: Film in Singapore*. Singapore: Oxford University Press with Ngee Ann Polytechnic, 2000.

Vasil, Raj. *Asianising Singapore: The PAP's Management of Ethnicity*. Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995.

Zhao Wei Films. "881: Festivals." Zhao Wei Films Website (accessed July 21, 2008).

<http://www.zhaowei.com/881/festivals.html>.

## Filmography

*12 Lotus / Shi Er Lian Hua*. Directed by Royston Tan. Singapore: Studio 10 Twenty-Eight Production, Mediacorp Raintree Pictures, Infinite Frameworks, Scorpio East Pictures, 2008.

*12 Storeys*. Directed by Eric Khoo. Singapore: Zhao Wei Films, 1997.

*15*. Directed by Royston Tan. Singapore: Zhao Wei Films, 2003.

*881*. Directed by Royston Tan. Singapore: Mediacorp Raintree Pictures, Zhao Wei Films, Media Development Authority, Scorpio East Pictures, Infinite Frameworks, 2007.

*Air Hostess / Kongzhong Xiaojie*. Directed by Yi Wen. Hong Kong: Cathay/MP & GI, 1959.



*Be With Me*. Directed by Eric Khoo. Singapore: Zhao Wei Films, 2005.

*Forever Fever*. Directed by Glenn Goei. Singapore: Tiger Tiger Productions, 1998.

*Hong Kong Nocturne / Xiangjiang Hua Yue Ye*. Directed by Inoue Umetsugu. Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers, 1967.

*Hong Kong Rhapsody / Hua Yue Liang Xiao*. Directed by Inoue Umetsugu. Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers, 1968.

*I Not Stupid*. Directed by Jack Neo. Singapore: Mediacorp Raintree Pictures, 2002.

*I Not Stupid Too*. Directed by Jack Neo. Singapore: Mediacorp Raintree Pictures, 2006.

*Mambo Girl / Manbo Nülang*. Directed by Yi Wen. Hong Kong: Cathay/MP & GI, 1957.

*Mee Pok Man*. Directed by Eric Khoo. Singapore: Zhao Wei Films, 1995.

*Money No Enough*. Directed by Tay Teck Lock. Singapore: JSP Entertainment, 1998.

*Song of a Songstress / Genü Zhige*. Directed by Fang Peilin. China: Qidong Film Company, 1948.

*Street Angel / Malu Tianshi*. Directed by Yuan Muzhi. China: Mingxing (Star) Film Company, 1937.

*The Hole / Dong*. Directed by Tsai Ming-liang. Taiwan: Haut et Court, Le Sept Arte, Arc Light Films, China Television, Central Motion Picture Corporation, 1998.

*The Loving Couple / Xin Xin Xiang Yin*. Directed by Yi Wen. Hong Kong: Cathay/MP & GI, 1960.

*The Wild Wild Rose / Ye Meigui Zhi Lian*. Directed by Wang Tianlin. Hong Kong: Cathay/MP & GI, 1960.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Cinenumerology: an interview with Royston Tan, one of Singapore's most versatile filmmakers

by [Anne Ciecko](#)



Singaporean box-office sensation *881*

Rotterdam International Film Festival (IFFR), January 2008:

At a hotel restaurant, I meet with Royston Tan who is just finishing a jury meeting for the Tiger Awards. As we are about to begin our interview, someone interrupts to ask Royston where the print of his latest film *881* is coming from. Emergency trouble-shooting ensues as Royston coolly ascertains it's probably in Taiwan, providing his "producer's contact, straightaway." Tan's growing oeuvre includes numbered features: his bad-boy docu-drama debut *15* (2002), followed by the wistful *4:30* (2005) and the effervescent musical *881*, the top-grossing Singaporean film of 2007 — the one whose print may have gone missing...

Anne Ciecko: So *881* is going to be shown here at IFFR for its European premiere. I just watched the video in the press media library.

Royston Tan: It's a crazy film.

AC: A major breakthrough for you in terms of box office! Were you surprised as far as the reception was concerned, and what do you perceive to be the film's life now in a more international sphere?

RT: Well I think never expected *881* to be a hit, a hit to the point whereby all the songs in the film become almost like our national anthem. Even little kids know how to sing the songs, and the thing was to bring out our very repressed dialect, one off the languages that we have not spoken for a very long time. So I wanted to explore that, and now that it has become such a big hit in Southeast Asia. I'm quite used... to have only a few audiences watching my film, or most of my films have been banned in the country or things like that. But this time there has been a big change. But I'm thinking in a different light whereby when I did *881* I wanted to challenge myself as to whether I can tell a story that everyone in Singapore can relate to. ...

AC: What are your current projects?



## Follow-up feature 12 Lotus



Short *My Sars Lover*



Teen angst in 15



Childhood in 4:30

RT I'm currently working on a brand new feature film [the 2008 *getai* musical melodrama called *12 Lotus*.] It is a musical too. And I have just set up my own company. It's called Ten28 Studios — so another number [laughs]! Right now we are developing this new project. And also before I came to Rotterdam I just finished doing a short film called *My SARS Lover*.

AC: You've had a history of connections between shorts and features.

RT: But somehow every time I do a short film, it's almost like when you see a feature film, you see traces of familiar characters from my short films. So it's almost like a little diary that you have, how you see the character in your short film growing up in a feature film.

AC What's your sense of taking the pulse of the current scene in Singapore as far as film culture is concerned? You've been a decidedly independent filmmaker, and now you've found a place at the box-office. Do you see more young Singaporean filmmakers wanting to stay in Singapore and make films there? Do you think that you're inspiring younger filmmakers?

RT: I think that with the success of *881* there has been a confidence gained back for local Singaporean local productions. One very very healthy sign was in the past people would say, "Let's go and watch a Singapore film," and when they said "Singapore film," it comes with a very bad punch. But now this time they just said, "Oh let's go watch this film." They don't differentiate between a Singapore film or a Hollywood film. We are dominated by Hollywood films most of the time, but right now there's a lot of confidence...And also for some strange reason somebody made a film called *Becoming Royston* [the 2007 feature directed by newcomer Nicholas Chee]. Some young filmmakers made a feature film about someone like me! That was one of the exciting things that happened this last year.

AC: Can you say more about the language or dialect too, because that's been significant in your other films as well.

RT: It's Hokkien. It's a dialect that comes from the southern part of China, and we [ethnically Chinese Singaporeans] are all descendents from the southern part of China. We are all Chinese. But this particular dialect or language has been repressed, because in 1979 we wanted to unify and have one common language which is English, and the second language is Mandarin. So as a result, in the new current generation they are not exposed to the beauty of such wonderful language...That is my feeling because I am Hokkien, and I wanted to retain a bit of myself and immortalize that in my film.

AC: It seems that in contemporary Singaporean film, Hokkien and really hybrid Singlish have found their way into certain genres, especially comedy, and now the musical. Do you think there's a connection between language and dialect and those genres?

RT: I don't know whether there's a connection, but I think it is because on television you are not allowed to show a lot of things in Hokkien or Singlish, so everybody pumps it into other outlets like a movie, and



sometimes it get too much. It's like we are repressed; we cannot show this here...Let's show everything there [in a film]. That's why sometimes too much of it becomes a problem...

AC: It seems like the genre is particularly celebratory of language: the wordplay of comedy. It's an interesting issue for your films too, how much is lost in translation, in subtitling...

RT: Oh yes. So much is lost. Like if you were to watch *881* in Singapore, you could see people laughing every single second...This is the European premiere. In Korea they laugh, but not so much. But in Singapore... straightaway they get it. We play with words, how they rhyme and things like that.

AC: My collaborator with me on a project on the Korean wave in Southeast Asia translated for me the Korean bits of dialogue, which as I read in other interviews you decided not to translate in your film *4:30*. That's really interesting — how the Korean language gets rendered in that way, as undecipherable for those characters...

So it seems to me, in charting your amazing career trajectory, that festivals have been so critical for different aspects — from financing to casting to nurturing projects from short to feature. Is that the case, that (especially) the Asian and European festival circuit has been really critical to the building of your body of work?

RT: Definitely. In my case, I was first introduced in Pusan International Film Festival, and through that festival I got introduced to the European festivals like Rotterdam, like Cannes. But in fact it's more so for Rotterdam because ever since after *15*, Rotterdam has been trying to get my films to show in its festival [as world premiere] — but with no success. But they have still been constantly promoting my works, having interviews, or allowing grants and things like that—that helps us profoundly...

AC: As a formerly emerging and now established filmmaker, what do you think can be done to make festivals even more supportive?

RT: What Rotterdam is doing now is exhibiting first and second features to promote up-and-coming filmmakers, but what we are now also very concerned [about] is the filmmaker who has just finished making a first film; he might not be able to make a second film. Many, many filmmakers disappear this way. So in fact we [the Tiger jury] were just discussing is that there might be something that can be done on this level to help upcoming filmmakers.

Just one minute it's my producer...

[Royston takes a cellphone call from his producer Gary with an update about the global whereabouts of film prints for *881*, deliberating whether it'd be better to ship a print to Rotterdam from Miami or Singapore for Monday's screening. After a few minutes we resume the conversation...]

AC: Can you say more about casting your films? You used a lot of nonprofessional actors in your films earlier on but not with *881*, right?



881's glorious Papaya Sisters



Rivals — Durian Sisters





Royston Tan

RT: Yeah. But the strange thing about 881 is they are not really professional actors either. They are real singers. It's all their first time [acting onscreen]...

AC: The making of documentary on the DVD for *4:30* was really interesting regarding the use of nonprofessional actors (who are great onscreen in all your films), although the Korean guy Kim Young-Jun had some TV credits, albeit modest ones.

RT: Very very few...

AC: And the little boy was completely amazing. [Xiao Li Yuan who previously had a very small role in Singaporean filmmaker Jack Neo's *Homerun*, 2003, a remake of the Iranian film *Children of Heaven*]

RT: [emphatically] He's amazing! And he's as tall as I am now, and he's like, "OK, I'm waiting to grow up so that you can cast me in a new film."

AC: When I was watching the making of the documentary for *4:30*, however, I thought it would be really scandalous for some people in terms of child labor. That's because it's 3:00 in the morning and you've been working on the film all night, and here's this little kid. He's really a little kid — he was so poised though.

RT: The problem with this little kid was every time we had night shooting we'd start late. But he had this problem. He had to sleep exactly at 12 midnight, and he was like ... [imitates an extremely groggy young actor]...

AC: So you're going to keep with your pattern of trying to work with nonprofessional or relatively inexperienced actors?

RT: I still want to work with them...[T]here are certain roles that very raw nonprofessional actors cannot deliver, and there are certain roles which I feel that [are not for] somebody who's gone through a lot of acting [training]...I always like to switch their roles in the film. What is fun is that whether they are experienced or inexperienced, I always make sure that they do not really know the script. I will make it like what I always call a structure experience for them, meaning that they don't know what scene they are actually going to do today; sometimes something different and natural comes out. And that's what I want to capture in my film. In the case of *4:30*, they were all given an 80 page script to memorize, but on the first day of filming I would throw away the whole script and ask them to act with their eyes and follow the things that I do.

AC: And *15* as well, was that very largely improvised?

RT: Improvised with a lot of precautions. I had a premonition that one of my actors was going to get into trouble but I did not know who. So I wrote many different versions of the script. I wrote it in a structure whereby if any of my actors disappeared, the whole thing would still continue.

AC: Is that true that you had an ambulance on hand for the self-mutilation scene?

RT: Yeah.

AC: People I've shown the film too either love it or they can't bear it; it's too visceral for them. But *4:30* has such a different vibe. I can see how it's the same filmmaker but it's got a whole different center. It's nice to see a range.

RT: Yes, I want to surprise my audience every time, to let them know what I can do and to show them I don't only make one kind of film. I think there's many different sides to Royston...

AC: Would you be taken aback if a critic looked at all your features even *881* and called them queer films?

RT: Yeah, they say *881* is a lesbian film.

AC: There're always types of intense same-sex bonding and friendship in your films.

RT: You know I don't know how to answer this question because it really funny because when I was first starting out, they said, "There's no female characters in your films." Now I have all female characters in my film and they say it is a lesbian film. But personally for me in all my films I've never seen the distinction between whether you're a male or a female. To me I see all my characters are human, no differentiation of sex.

AC: A totally random thing just popped into my head about Singaporean comedy: the chicken factor. Is there something about the chicken as in *881* that supposed to be iconically Singaporean?

RT: Yeah. There's a lot of play on words with *chicken*, a lot of funny examples of bad words that all have to do with chickens, and the local audience really laughed...

AC: Even if something is lost in translation, it seems the subtitling of *881* really conveyed the sexual and scatological nuances of the chicken word-play.

RT: *881*'s not too melodramatic for you?

AC: No, it's kind of campy, so it works. I've never seen the live spectacle of the *getai* [Chinese seventh lunar month stage performance] singers, only in Singaporean movies. It seems to me that the song lyrics are expected to be over-the-top...

RT: It's really scary. The lyrics are not like, "I look like the blossom, how beautiful." It's like, "My life is shit..." This is the very directness of Hokkien [language].

AC: Is that connected with opera tradition too?

RT: Originally, yes. And later all the tunes have been modernized to make it pop.

AC: You get some of that sense of cultural history the way you've framed



it in 881 with the characters of the MTV-style techno-girls, the Durian Sisters, in antagonism to something more traditional...There're really indeterminate. They speak English as their first language, and they don't speak Hokkien well. [The Durian Sisters are rivals of the film's *getai* heroines, the Papaya Sisters, played by Mindee Ong and Yeo Yann Yann]

RT: No, they don't...In real life they are really like that. They are not even acting. They're like, "Oh my God!" They're real VJs from MTV. They were called the Double Troubles. They are half Norwegian and half Chinese [May Wan Teh and Choy Wan Teh]. I said, OK, I'm going to try to get them to act."

AC: And before I forget, regarding casting, I had read about 4:30 that you cast a Korean, somehow paying homage to the Pusan Film Festival. Is that true?

RT: Yeah, it is.

AC: But it wasn't a duty?

RT: I wanted to make it in time for the 10th anniversary [October 2005] but it wasn't ready for the Festival. I just finished shooting....I'm think I'm still not over Korea yet. I'm still writing a script with a Korean. There's something very beautiful about people not being able to understand one another but trying to figure that out. I like that kind of feeling.

AC: I was thinking about that kind of feeling in recent Southeast Asian cinema. For example, in Pen-ek's movies; he has some kind of Thai or other Asian characters in in-between spaces...

RT: Asano...

AC: Yes, [in *Last Life in the Universe* and *Invisible Waves*] characters are played by Japanese actor Asano Tadanobu, although his latest film *Ploy* employs a different Asano-esque young actor [Lao-Australian Ananda Everingham.] What is your sense of the bigger Southeast Asian regional scene more generally? I really liked this recent Malaysian film *Flower in Pocket* (Liew Seng Tat's feature that won a Tiger award).

RT: I like that very much. [In Southeast Asian cinema] I think everyone is struggling, but in the last five years there's been a great interest in Chinese films, and there has been a lot of reinventing language ... I just came back from Jakarta and right now they are coming out with all kinds of films with different textures.... The great thing about it is it's very diverse, still. Although we are Southeast Asians, we are like a very small country coming together. There's a lot of celebration of diversity, which I really like.

AC: So do you see yourself as a Chinese filmmaker who's part of a Greater Chinese diaspora cinema? Chineseness is so prominent in your films to date.

RT: Yeah, but I belong to the second generation of immigrants who live in Singapore. I think for every Singaporean, we are constantly searching

and looking because we don't feel here nor there, so in the films we're always constantly searching and looking.

AC: Even the ritual of the Hungry Ghost Festival. I read in a book by an anthropologist it is a Chinese diasporic invention created by ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, like a fiction of a traditional festival trying to celebrate Chineseness. [Jean DeBernardi's *Rites of Belonging: Memory, Modernity, and Identity in a Malaysian Chinese Community*]

RT: Unity...

AC: "... prosperity, and commercial aspects of Chineseness."

RE: It used to be just a performance for the ghost to watch, but twenty years later it's evolved into something like a pop thing that everybody watches, that later becomes scandalous like bikini shows. It's a weird kind of a thing. But right now because of *881* everybody's trying to find their roots again...

AC: So has this film become so much a part of the popular imaginary now that it will influence future festivals?

RT: In bookings for the performances next year, the prices have all doubled. And because we fictionalize and dramatize the costumes in *881*, now everybody is following that. [*Royston Tan pantomimes the final spectacular showdown 881 between the female singing acts.*]

AC: Yeah. The projectile bullet bra, that was really funny.

RT: It was a bit of a self-indulgence that I liked to do.

AC: But the ending's tragic too, apropos (I suppose) of the songs.

RT: Yeah, very very sad. Onstage they sing — that's when they feel alive. You see the contrasts in the life of all these people. Onstage they're happy, they're alive, la-la-la. But offstage...So they live on stage, and they die when the footlights go off. That is what I experienced when I was hanging out with them.

AC: So you actually tried to immerse yourself in *getai* culture?

RT: During the seventh month, I tried to follow them. When they were running, I was really running with my handcam to follow them, to experience the tension. And to a certain extent, I sang with them onstage. They asked me, "You go." So I know that feeling. As a director, it's not that I cannot understand their world.

AC: Last question: You mentioned the MTV connection when you were casting *881*. In Singapore how interconnected are the pop music industry and film? Because in all of Southeast Asia, there's been a history of trajectory of people who worked in MTV and commercials into features. Do you find that the pop music industry and film are mutually benefiting each other, or do you think that they corrupt or cannibalize each other?

RT: I think they stimulate each other for different reasons. I belong to the MTV microwave generation...Obviously subconsciously the things

that we listen to, the things that we watch, that is in our work. It's really up to you how you are going to use it to your advantage. So, yeah.

Barely into his thirties, with four features already to his credit, Royston Tan has clearly found creative ways to do just this: to use the melange of cultural influences that inform his work to his advantage, finding coolness amidst the chaos, garnering critical respect along the way. And the European premiere screening of *881* (which finally went smoothly despite the wayward film print), was met with enthusiasm too.

[Go to essay in this issue on 881](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### Visible “waves”: notes on Koreanness, pan-Asianness, and some recent Southeast Asian art films

by [Anne Ciecko](#) and [Hunju Lee](#)



First shot of the lonely boy Xiao Wu in *4:30*.



First shot of the lonely man Kyoji in *Invisible Waves*.

As Korean cinema's profile continues to flow and ebb in the international image market, it becomes clearer that the legendary Korean *hanryu* or wave of popular cultural products (television shows, music, movies and stars) is not a single globally encompassing tsunami but a complex system of many currents.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] While Korean cinema remains one of the dominant tidal forces in East and Southeast Asian markets, films from countries such as Thailand and Singapore have also been sweeping through the international film festival circuit. This article examines two recent striking cinematic cases, Royston Tan's *4:30* (2005) and Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Invisible Waves* (2006) in order to discuss patterns of textual and contextual cultural displacements and convergences. The diegetic inscription of Koreanness within these films includes Korean characters (and, extra-diegetically, Korean actors) who must negotiate unfamiliar geographical and linguistic terrain. Additionally these films raise larger questions about the nature of Asian identities more generally, though interstitial and hybrid elements of pan-Asianness.



Korean actress Kang Hye-Jeong as Noi (with her character's baby) in *Invisible Waves*.



Director Pen-ek Ratanaruang and star Asano Tadanobu present *Invisible Waves* at the Hong Kong International Film Festival 2006.



The Korean wave paradigm is a transnational media invention, with even the term itself, first coined by Beijing journalists, registering the presence of Korean cultural products in China. The term *hanryu* is a translanguistic homophone to an existing compound word suggesting a “cold current.” It has been suggested that *hanryu* has undergone four historical evolutionary moments:

1. a germination period (1993-1997) in which Korean dramas and popular songs were introduced to and positively received by mainland Chinese audiences;
2. a growth period (1998-1999) when other East Asian countries and territories including Vietnam, Taiwan, and Hong Kong showed a keen

Alienating school life in 4:30: "I don't have dreams."



*Invisible Waves*' wanderers Kyoji and Noi meet on shipboard.

Images from 4:30.



The Korean tenant's failed suicide attempt...



... is witnessed by the boy in 4:30.

interest in Korean pop culture (for example, Korean content on Hong Kong's Channel V);

3. an explosive third period (2000-2004) in which *hanryu* became recognized as a cultural zeitgeist with successful K-pop concerts and fandom in China and extraordinary popularity in Japan of Korean singers, TV dramas, and films; and
4. an expansion period from 2005 onwards in which Korean popular cultural products have crossed over to wider global audiences.[2]

Besides courting Korean blockbuster auteurs such as Park Chan-Wook and Bong Jun-Ho, Hollywood has registered the impact of *hanryu* with the casting of Korean actors and a growing number of co-productions. Veteran Korean actor Park Joong-Hoon co-starred in a cop thriller set in New York City and Seoul, *American Dragons* (directed by Ralph Hemecker, 1998) with the U.S. straight-to-video title *Double Edge* (although it reportedly had a theatrical release in South Korea). He also appeared in the tepid Jonathan-Demme-helmed Hitchcock remake, *The Truth About Charlie* (2002). The popular star of one of Korea's major *hanryu* hits, the comedy *My Sassy Girl* (2001), Jeon Ji-Hyun, is renamed Gianna Jun and plays Saya a human-vampire hybrid in *Blood the Last Vampire* (Chris Nahon, 2009), the live action adaptation of the Japanese anime classic (Hiroyuki Kitakubo, 2000) which spawned popular manga and videogames. [See [essay on Jeon Ji-Hyun](#) in this issue.] One of Asia's biggest pop music sensations, Korean singer-actor Rain (or Bi in Korean), has a small supporting role and a few lines of English dialogue in the Wachowski Brothers' live action remake of the Japanese cult TV series *Speed Racer* (2008).

Korean actor Jang Dong-Kun is an Asian futuristic hero in *Laundry Warrior* (written and directed by Sngmoo Lee, 2009) an English-language action/fantasy set in the U.S. West, and co-starring Geoffrey Rush and Kate Bosworth. Filmed in New Zealand, *Laundry Warrior* is a Hollywood, South Korean, and New Zealand collaboration that in an earlier incarnation was envisioned to be a Korean-Chinese co-production with a co-starring role for Zhang Ziyi. The New Zealand partnership is facilitated by the recent signing of a South Korean and New Zealand co-production treaty agreement and the participation of *Lord of the Rings*' producer Barrie Osborne.

Films with U.S. indie origins are also increasingly featuring Korean actors. *Never Forever* (2007), directed by Korean-born Gina Kim, casts Ha Jung-Woo as an immigrant laborer who becomes involved in a relationship with a white American suburban housewife married to a Korean American man. Korean actor Jeong Jun-Ho has a significant cameo in the Korea-U.S. co-production *West 32nd* (2007), a New York Koreatown-set drama starring Korean American actor John Cho and directed by Korean American filmmaker Michael Kang.[3] *West 32nd* was backed by Korean conglomerate CJ Entertainment, Korea's largest and most powerful film producer and distributor in the post-Asian economic crisis (1997-98) era. CJ Entertainment has had successful partnership relations with Paramount and DreamWorks, as well as close ties with the multiplex via its subsidiary, CJ CGV. Kang's film, although critically well-received, had limited release; presumably the Korean American experience was not perceived to be widely relatable or intelligible to Korean audiences. On the other hand, CJ Entertainment's involvement with and investment in the Hollywood musical fairytale *August Rush* (Kirsten Sheridan, 2007), which featured small cameos by Korean actress Ku Hye-Sun and rapper Tablo from the Korean hip-hop group Epik High, led to huge Korean box-office returns.[4]



Xiao Wu finds a hair while bathing.



He then steals another from the drunken sleeping man.



He adds it to his "book" with other ... .. relics and quotidian observations.



Mise en scene and composition underscore proximity and distance between characters in *4:30*.

With Asian artfilms such as Royston Tan's *4:30* and Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Invisible Waves*, the casting of Korean actors can be viewed as a vehicle for "networking" in the international film festival circuit and international arthouse theaters. Such pan-Asian financing contributes to the creation of a cinema of dissociated and decontextualized Korean (and other Asian) characters. The casting of Kang Hye-Jeong in *Invisible Waves*, for example, enabled a fiscal co-production arrangement with CJ Entertainment (which also led to limited screening in Seoul multiplexes in May 2006). However some Korean critics and audiences took note of a self-conscious creation of pan-Asian filmic identity, and the transparent exaggeration of Kang Hye-Jeong's image in the marketing of the film in Korea.

Both *4:30* and *Invisible Waves* have traveled widely, with screenings at major Asian, European, and North American film festivals; and their respective pedigrees are decidedly transnational. *4:30* had its premiere at the NHK Asian Film Festival in Japan in December 2005 followed by the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2006; it then screened the Deauville International Film Festival in France, the Hong Kong International Film Festival, the Singapore International Film Festival, the Cannes Film Market, and elsewhere. *Invisible Waves* had its world premiere at Berlin just days before playing the Bangkok International Film Festival in February 2006, followed by theatrical release in Thailand and screening at the Hong Kong International Film Festival in April. Its festival life continued to India (Osian's Cinefan Asian Film Festival), Toronto, Portland, Argentina, and elsewhere. *Invisible Waves*, which was submitted and then withdrawn as Thailand's entry for the best foreign language film category of the Academy Awards, is a Dutch, Thai, Hong Kong, and South Korean co-production with dialogue in English, Japanese, Cantonese, Korean, and Thai.





"Do you know where people you love go when they die? In your head..."



"...and in your heart."



Xiao Wu seeks to console and be consoled.



Orange juice and Korean beef noodles with a note in Korean.



"Thank you."

Made by Singapore's *enfant terrible* filmmaker Royston Tan as the follow-up to his controversial street-kid debut dramatic feature *15: The Movie* (2003), *4:30* is a Japanese and Singaporean co-production with dialogue mainly in Mandarin Chinese, as well as a small amount of English and Korean. The Japanese backer, the film fund of NHK (the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation) scouted the project in its early stages as a second feature at film festivals, and worked with it as a script translated into Japanese, developed from Tan's treatment into a feature-length screenplay by collaborating writer Liam Yeo.[5] Through NHK World television, non-festival Asian audiences in countries such as South Korea were exposed to the movie, which was also supported by Zhao Wei Films, the Singaporean independent production house started by filmmaker Eric Khoo and financial manager James Toh to nurture local talent. Several of multilingual/multiethnic Singapore's national languages — which include Malay and Tamil, as well as Chinese (Mandarin dialect) and English — are spoken in *4:30*. While the local vernacular patois Singlish with slang derived from the suppressed Hokkien Chinese dialect and Malay is used rather subversively in a number of other contemporary Singaporean films, such as those by pop auteur Jack Neo, Tan's features to-date have been primarily in Mandarin and Hokkien Chinese dialect. However, *4:30*'s unseen teacher ideologically drills her class on national identity in "proper" (although accented) English and berates the protagonist in the language; hers is a disturbingly unsympathetic neo-colonial voice.

*4:30* focuses on the relationship between a fatherless, young, ethnically-Chinese Singaporean boy (Xiao Li Yuan) with an absent mother working in China, and a suicidal Korean male tenant (Kim Young-Jun) living in his home. Following his previous foray into the laconically surreal misadventures of a Japanese man in Thailand in *Last Life in the Universe* (2003, a Thai/Japanese/Singaporean/Dutch co-production), Ratanaruang's *Invisible Waves* incorporates the unlikely encounter between a Japanese man (again played by *Last Life*'s Japanese star Asano Tadanobu) and an at least partially Korean woman (Kang Hye-Jeong) on a ship between Macau and post-tsunami Phuket. In *4:30* the Korean character is profoundly isolated, abject, and self-destructive, and his alienation charges the boy's fixation on him with a special poignancy. In *Invisible Waves*, the seemingly vacuous yet quirkily attractive Korean woman Noi, a distracted young mother and convenient romantic interest for a hitman on the lam, is literally set adrift in a state of indeterminacy.



After the Korean tenant disappears, Xiao Wu sinks his illicit nocturnal photo in the aquarium ...



... and tapes the clock to permanently read 4:30.



Xiao Wu grieves his loss in close-up...



... and imagines a pair of comforting and guiding hands.

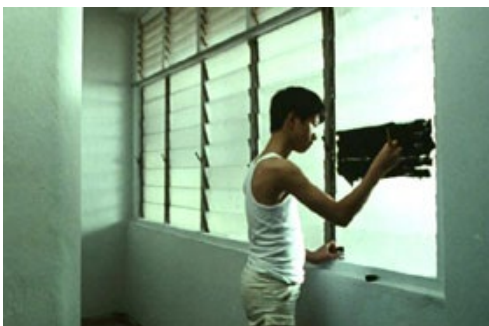
Royston Tan is quoted on the website for his film *4:30* as saying,

“The reason for using a Korean character was in part, a way of thanking the people at Pusan especially the Pusan International Film Festival for their tremendous support for many of my short films over the last few years. It was also my intention to show that loneliness is universal and cross-cultural....”[6]

The Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF), with its successful promotional plan and industry market, is arguably the most powerful Asian festival in the current pantheon. Likewise talented Thai director Ratanaruang’s festival-darling embeddedness/indebtedness also has an impact upon and is impacted by his pan-Asian casting and connection with production/sales powerhouse company Fortissimo Films involved in the promotion and distribution of the film.[7] These components reflect the fact that *Invisible Waves* is an international co-production with a team of collaborators that also includes Australian-born, Hong Kong-based (but increasingly global Asian oriented), prestige cinematographer Christopher Doyle. In addition to Tatanobu and Kang, the cast is rounded out by eccentric characterizations by Hong Kong veteran Eric Tsang and Macau-born singer-actress Maria Cordero, as well as several other Japanese actors in ambiguous, portentous roles.

In stark contrast to Korean actress Kang’s certifiable star reputation (having appeared in Park Chan Wook’s international sensation *Old Boy* (2003) as well as the domestic blockbuster *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, 2005), Seoul-based Korean actor Kim Young-Jun brings to his role in *4:30* a slender resume of TV credits. While Kang’s character in *Invisible Waves* may be seen as a curiously self-conscious reconstitution of her trademark, sexualized, naïf persona, Kim is arguably freed from such intertextual baggage.

[Go to page 2](#)



At the end of *4:30*, Xiao Wu paints the window black, just before the screen fades to black.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Scrutinizing the inscrutable in 4:30

Images from *Invisible Waves*.



The mysterious “monk” with the bandaged head who gives Kyoji money, tickets, and instructions is played by veteran Hong Kong actor Eric Tsang.



Kyoji experiences a rare moment of human connection when he finds and tends to baby Nid, left alone by her affectionate but irresponsible mother Noi.

As the Korean tenant Jung in 4:30, Kim’s first onscreen appearance is via an intense closeup of his face with unspoken sadness troubling his countenance. As the scene progresses, the Korean is revealed as unsuccessfully trying to hang himself, his act witnessed by the young Chinese Singaporean boy who also resides in the house. Xiao Wu obsessively harvests and records Jung’s found and stolen physical traces (a pubic hair, a photograph, tears on a tee-shirt). The film’s title refers to the boy’s nocturnal ritual time of entering the Korean man’s bedroom to spy on him (often drunk and in various states of collapsed or collapsing consciousness), inspect his body or belongings, or wait for his return.

With the most minimal dialogue, the film suggests a broken romantic relationship as the reason for Jung’s deep melancholy, but his alienation is also registered via his difficulty in communicating and understanding his life in Singapore. He works nights, smokes incessantly, takes pills (to sleep?), and listens to rueful music. He rarely speaks throughout the film: On one occasion he struggles to order an ice cream from a street vender; on another he speaks a few lines in Korean to the boy, tapping fingers to his head and heart. (“Do you know where people you love go when they die? In your head and in your heart.”) Tan deliberately does not translate any of the Korean in the film — such as song lyrics (moodily recounting a lovers’ walk along the sea) by the late Korean folk-singer Kim Kwang Seok or the man’s few utterances. Also, no translation is given for the few Korean characters the young man writes to the boy saying, “Thank you,” in a note after he leaves the boy a glass of orange juice and a cup of his favorite instant beef noodles. The effects of silence and unintelligibility are further distancing, even when it appears that the man and boy have begun to make some potential connections with each other.

Through various cinematic and narrative devices, Tan draws parallels between the lonely boy and his adult counterpart. In one ironic scene, disaffected Xiao Wu’s strident English-speaking teacher comments on Singaporean citizenship. Isolated student Jung also clearly never feels at home throughout, as a perpetual outsider or foreigner in this seemingly pluralistic society. On one of the few occasions when the boy’s absent mother (on business in mainland China) calls, she asks about the Korean “uncle” (a Mandarin term the boy uses throughout to refer to other adult male figures). And the boy writes an embroidered fictional school composition about his hero, his Korean “dad” who seldom smiles and smells of “baby Johnson’s powder and beer.” The boy’s playful Singlish syntax likewise colors outside the lines of the “proper” grammatically-correct English promoted by the state (which launched an ongoing “Speak Good English Campaign” in 2000 under then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.) This scene is arguably as an indictment of intolerance of nonconformity in Singapore, as much as it is a critique of the inadequacies of the school system.

4:30’s mise en scene offers visual matches, such as the rare moment when the boy and man are wearing identical white tank tees and sitting together on the outside stairs; or when the boy and man alternately bathe in the tub when the other enters to urinate (a pattern naughtily subverted by the boy who turns



The stranger is immediately co-opted as Nid's temporary caretaker when Noi wants to take a swim.



"Lizard," the karaoke-loving, beer-drinking Japanese hitman, follows and observes all.

from the toilet to pee in the tub). Additionally the boy inserts himself into the Korean's life by replacing the man's CD with a recording of his own voice, customizing the man's cigarette box, and mimicking the tenant's gesture of leaving food and drink for him with his own reciprocal offering.

While Korean masculinity is a source of near-fetishistic fascination through the voyeuristic gaze of the child (a child in critical need of role models), both man and boy are in a state of most desperate crisis. Arguably, in *4:30*, Tan suggests a pathology of the *hanryu* phenomenon as "imagined cosmopolitanism" in a claustrophobic and dysfunctionally Sino-centric cultural economy.[8][[open notes in new window](#)] By the end of the film, the depressed Korean and all his residual artifacts have literally disappeared from the Singaporean "home" that was never his own.

## Deciphering the ciphers in *Invisible Waves*

The appearance of a pretty young woman, Noi, played by Kang Hye-Jeong is initially an apparent bright spot in the increasingly miserable existence of Kyoji (Asano Tadanobu), a chef in a Japanese restaurant whose life is directed by his Thai employer (Toon Hiranyasap). After killing, at the boss's bidding, the restaurateur/gangster's Japanese wife (played by Japanese actress Tomono Kuga) with whom he's been having an affair, Kyoji is dispatched on a "vacation" which takes him from Macau to Phuket, Thailand.



Kyoji's hellish cabin imprisons him. And he is entrapped in ...



... conversation with a Japanese man who says he's a former schoolmate.

Noi, it seems, has also been conveniently/coincidentally sent away on the cruise trip by her boyfriend. Speaking in halting English throughout the film except for a few words when she writes down the digits of her telephone number (reciting them partially in Chinese with the last four digits in Korean), she takes notice of Kyoji on the ship's deck and comments in halting English that she can tell he needs air and he looks as if he were seeing a ghost. The few Korean words she speaks and the charge of Kang's persona are the only clear markers of Koreanness in the film.



The philosophical bartender (note

Displaced and deterritorialized from their respective countries of origin and inhabiting unfamiliar environments and an underworld milieu where their native tongues are fairly useless and they are always "other," the Japanese and Korean characters are reduced in their agency, drifting, and tentatively drawn to



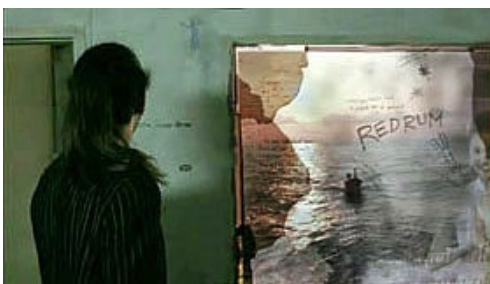
shark tank in the background) ...



... looks like Kyoji's father in the photo observed in an early scene of the film...



... and the man glimpsed in an elevator later.



Phuket is far from welcoming for Kyoji as evidenced by hotel room graffiti referencing *The Shining*.

each other. In Kyoji's interaction with Noi, he seems to respond to her simplicity as something potentially desirable, a release of sorts from all the anxiety and guilt caused by carrying out the boss's orders. Noi's singular unwittingness about everything, from appropriate and responsible ways to attend to her baby, to all criminal activity around her, is underscored in the diminutive meaning of her name in Thai. She shares this name with a (Thai) character in Pen-ek's previous film *The Last Life in the Universe*, also scripted (or co-written, with director Pen-ek) by Thai writer Prabda Yoon. In fact, Noi's baby's name Nid, with another diminutive meaning, is also used in the previous film. In some press materials for the film and in its portfolio for the HKF Hong Kong-Asia Film Financing Forum (which describes *Invisible Waves* as "a truly pan-Asian film"),[9] it is suggested that Noi in *Invisible Waves* is both Thai and Korean, although the character and the star power of Korean actress Kang seem even more unsettled by this hybrid construction. Some members of the Korean audience for the film criticized the film's marketing strategies, emphasizing Kang's participation in a movie that is mainly a showcase for Japanese star Asano. Some Korean critics compared this narrative to aspects of the Korean film *A Bittersweet Life* (directed by Kim Ji-woon, 2005) and Hye-Jung Kang's character Noi to her role as Mido in *Old Boy*. That was the film that reportedly inspired Pen-ek to cast her, Park Chan-Wook's Korean masterpiece.[10] Prior to working with Pen-ek, Asano Tatanobu had appeared in some forty films and with major Japanese directors (among them Kitano Takeshi, Oshima Nagisa, and Miike Takashi — and Miike actually plays a yakuza in Pen-ek's *Last Life in the Universe*), often portraying perpetual loners, killers and/or depressives. Asano has himself been recognized as having a hint of exotic allure because of his mixed ancestry, an American maternal grandfather of Navajo heritage. Prior and subsequent to his two films to-date with Pen-ek, he also demonstrated his pan-Asian currency by starring in other hybrid productions including the French-titled Japanese/Taiwanese co-production *Café Lumière* (directed by Taiwanese auteur Hou Hsiao-Hsien, 2003) and the Central Asian Genghis Khan mega-epic *Mongol* (a Kazakh/Russian/Mongolian/German co-production helmed by Russian filmmaker Sergei Bodrov, 2007).

As the narrative of *Invisible Waves* slowly unfurls, relations and interconnections between characters, newly and tentatively forged or suggested, contribute to a sense of a kind of purgatory of pan-Asian in-betweenness, corrupted by a financial system of exchange. One central bonding gesture in the couple's demi-courtship on the nearly desolate and from Koji's perspective absurdly bleak, decrepit, and labyrinthine ship is a tender moment of the two slow dancing with the baby. Noi discloses that she was sent on this trip as a "gift," and Koji is uncannily lured to his fate by an exchangeable woman he doesn't yet realize is connected to his boss. Writing her cellphone number on a Hong Kong 100 dollar bill that Koji gives her as note paper, she jokes that she loves it when men give her money, and she directs him not to "spend my number."



Kyoji is told by Noi, "Don't spend my number" ...



... her cellphone number on a 100 dollar bill.





The battered Kyoji has a series of narrow escapes.

Kyoji is initially given money and a directive to leave Hong Kong by a mysterious monk with a bandaged head (played by Eric Tsang, whose accumulative roles in many triad-themes Hong Kong action films bear intertextually upon his fleeting and cryptic presence in this film). Later, after Kyoji is robbed and beaten up at his Phuket hotel, he phones his Thai boss for assistance and is directed to the cheerfully depraved karaoke-loving Lizard, played by Japanese actor Ken Mitsuishi who turns out to be a hitman and his designated executioner. Other Japanese characters that enter Kyoji's surreal world that speak to his disconnectedness include a shipboard bartender who may be his father (he looks just like a photo in Kyoji's former apartment) who serves him his drink of choice, milk ("such an innocent drink for someone like you") and talks to him of guilt and atonement. Kyoji is also accosted shipboard by a man he doesn't recognize, who claims to be a former classmate from Osaka: "Even the sea can seem so small." Within the dystopic limbo of *Invisible Waves*, shared Japanese nationality — or any national, territorial, linguistic, or ethnic identity for that matter — does not guarantee a sense of comfort or loyalty. Nor does getting lost in the world, as Kyoji's experiences are a nightmarish travesty of tourism.



After a chase, he lands from a fall in a dumptruck full of sand.



After finding out about Noi's relationship with his former boss, Kyoji is captured and held by gunpoint ...



... by Lizard and his men; he flees, is shot, and falls into the sea.



The "resurrected" Kyoji feels like a homeless ghost.



He seeks revenge with gun or poison for his promised freedom, but still stirs the boss's soup.



Kyoji softens at the happiness he sees in the man looking forward to his future with Noi and Nid.



Kyoji enjoys a last meal while resigning himself to fate.

## Conclusion: cinematic currents

Pan-Asianness and co-productive border-crossings are not a new phenomenon in Asian cinema. Sectors of independent and commercial/studio filmmaking and national cinemas themselves have been formed by issues of economics, geopolitics, and flows of people and capital. For example in Singapore's film history, prominent influences in a city-state where movies have always been multicultural are Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Malay (as well as American and British).[11] The Korean *hanryu* has been described as another such influence, part of a larger "region-wide 'reassertion of Asian identity...kind of a pan-Asianism.'"[12] In Royston Tan's *4:30* and Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Invisible Waves*, modes of production, film financing, and casting inform/are informed by unresolved and ambiguous cinematic narratives that traverse boundaries and



The sea, an ambiguous motif throughout *Invisible Waves*, offers a final image before the film's multilingual closing credits.

deal critically and creatively with a variety of dislocations. Traces of national, linguistic, and ethnic identities become markers of difference and signifiers of alienation, loss, loneliness, and something akin to nostalgia. However, in each of these films, tentative bonds are formed that hint at the possibility of solace and redemption in interstitial pan-Asian environments. For their makers, spaces-in-between and floating lives open up cinematic possibilities.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

Acknowledgments: The authors are grateful to the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts for a half-time Research Assistantship that enabled Hunju Lee to collaborate on this project. Anne Ciecko's sabbatical research in Korea was funded by a Marion and Jasper Whiting Foundation fellowship; and she would also like express appreciation to the Pusan International Film Festival, the Hong Kong International Film Festival, and the Rotterdam International Film Festival for the opportunity to interview and watch films by some of the directors discussed in this essay. Special thanks to the editors of *Jump Cut* for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1. The recession of the Korean wave has been noted by industry insiders starting in approximately 2006. Examples of *Variety Asia*'s coverage include "Korean Wave' Breaks as Film Exports Slump" (18 January 2007) by Darcy Paquet, noting 2006 international sales figures of Korean films reported by the national film organization KOFIC, especially declining sales to the Japanese market, <http://www.varietyasiaonline.com/content/view/625/53/> and "Crash of 'Korean Wave' Continues as Cannes Sales Slump" by Patrick Frater (25 May 2007), <http://www.varietyasiaonline.com/content/view/1439/53/> [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

2. See Go Chan-Su's discussion of "Hanryu and Cultural Policy," a paper presented at the Korean Policy Forum (KOPOF) in March 2006 and summarized for this article by Hunju Lee, from the Korean internet source, naver. The original Korean-language policy paper can be read at [www.kopof.or.kr/bbs/view.php?id=conference2&no=16](http://www.kopof.or.kr/bbs/view.php?id=conference2&no=16).

However, as suggested in the above-cited *Variety* coverage and elsewhere, not all industry-watchers are optimistic about the future of *hanryu*, as some note or predict stagnation and/or backlash. The current trend seems to be toward viewing the most regionally and globally potent wave as syncretically pan-Asian rather than exclusively Korean.

3. Anne Ciecko interviewed New York-based filmmaker Kang, who was premiering his debut feature *The Motel* to Korean audiences at the Pusan International Film Festival, his first visit to Korea, in November 2005. He discussed pan-Asian and Asian diasporic themes in his increasingly global filmmaking. Kang's ambitious Africa-set third feature-in-progress has been

supported by Pusan's Overseas Korean Foundation prize and has been represented in the Pusan Promotional Plan (PPP).

4. Kathy Rose A. Garcia discusses this phenomenon in her article titled "August's Success in Korea Surprises US Producer" in *Korean Times* January 16, 2008

[http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2008/01/141\\_17427.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2008/01/141_17427.html)

5. Tan describes the process of working with the Japanese financiers in the Filmmaker Seminar Series with Royston Tan and [film producer] Gary Goh on the Singapore New Wave website

<http://www.sgnewwave.com/main/?p=21>

6. See the director's statement on the Zhao Wei Films production house website, as well as the interview by Anne Ciecko with Royston Tan in this issue. [[return to essay](#)]

<http://www.zhaowei.com/430/synopsis.html>

7. Fortissimo's company profile describes the ways the company has "entered into activities related to the development, financing and co-production of films and earned production credits" on movies including *Invisible Waves*.

<http://www.fortissimo.nl/companyprofile/>

8. This trope is used by Kelly Fu Su Yin and Kai Khiun Liew in their article "Hallyu in Singapore: Korean Cosmopolitanism or the Consumption of Chineseness?" in *Korea Journal* (Winter 2005) 227-228.

9. HAF defines itself as the most important film-financing forum in Asia, its mission is to connect "filmmakers with upcoming projects with internationally prominent film financiers for co-production ventures":

<http://www.haf.org.hk/haf/> ; see the *Invisible Waves* project profile which describes Noi as Thai-Korean at

<http://www.haf.org.hk/haf/pdf/project05/project13.pdf>

10. This information was compiled by Hunju Lee from a variety of Korean-language magazines and blogs including the review of *Invisible Waves* by Jeon Eun-Jung in *NKino* (May 12, 2006).

11. See Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde's chapter on "Singapore: Developments, Challenges, and Productions" in *Contemporary Asian Cinema: Popular Culture in a Global Frame*, edited by Anne Ciecko (Berg, 2006), pp.71-82.

12. This quote comes from Singapore-based sociologist Habib Khondker in Dean Visser's article "Korea" fever is sweeping pop culture scene in Asia," *AP Breaking News* (February 3, 2002), also cited in "Korea as the Wave of the Future" by Jim Dator and Yeonseok Seo published in *Journal of Futures Studies*, 9.1 (August 2004): 31-44,

[http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/dator/japan/Korea\\_Wave.html](http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/dator/japan/Korea_Wave.html)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).



## Asia's beloved sassy girl: Jun Ji-Hyun's star image and her transnational stardom

by [JaeYoon Park](#)

This article examines the discourses around the images of a Korean female film star, Jun Ji-Hyun (1981- ), in order to explore how her star image and transnational stardom function in the production and circulation of meanings, identities, desires, and ideologies in contemporary Korean and Asian societies. Jun Ji-Hyun usually portrays a sassy, loud, and domineering character while also embodying traits of a pure-hearted girl.

At the domestic level, Jun emerged as a star in the late 1990s in the context of economically and politically turbulent years, in which Korean society was heading toward a more open and democratic society while dealing both with economic crisis and the implementation of a peaceful relationship with North Korea. At the regional level, her transnational stardom is situated within the burgeoning of Korean popular culture across Asia with the advent of global capitalism, which signifies a formation of pan-Asian culture.

This article focuses on Jun's star image in relation to the construction of femininity and female sexuality in the context of Korean society during the late 1990s and the early 2000s as well as the changing landscape of the transnational flow of cultural objects in contemporary Asia. I discuss the formation and impact of Jun's star image using four approaches. First, I provide an overview of the socio-historical context of Jun's stardom from the 1990s to the early 2000s and then brief synopses of Jun's films. This is followed by textual analyses of the films' gender representations, particularly as seen through the articulation of the male gaze in her films. Finally, I analyze audience responses from focus group interviews that I conducted both in Korea and the United States with Korean and Korean American youth regarding issues of Jun's star image and her stardom.

### Socio-historical context of Jun's stardom

The historical period of Jun's stardom marks an era of an increasingly pluralist environment as well as an exploding consumer and popular culture in Korean society. Kim Young-Sam, a civilian politician, came to office as President in South Korea in 1993 for the first time since the 1961 military coup, thereby ending thirty-two years of rule by army generals. The newly elected President Kim initiated democratic and anti-corruption reforms toward a "kinder and gentler government" and replaced key military leaders in an effort to reestablish civilian control of the military.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] The actual process of change, however, turned out to be slow and ineffective. The Korean economy went through a recession at the end of 1997 as the Asian financial crisis hit the country hard.



*My Sassy Girl* poster (Korea): Jun Ji-Hyun became one of the transnational "Korean Wave" stars in Asia in the early 2000s after the huge commercial success of *My Sassy Girl* (2001) in the region.



*"2 % Mineral Water"* TV commercial (Korea): TV commercials often capitalize on Jun's star images, particularly on images that emphasize

her “sassy” and “quirky” qualities. Click on link to see commercial.



[“Coca Cola” TV commercial \(Taiwan\):](#) This Taiwanese commercial repeats the gender dynamics of *My Sassy Girl* through its characterization of Jun as a physical, domineering girl and her effeminate, submissive boyfriend. Click on link to see commercial.



Kyun-Woo sees Jun’s drunken and staggering character in the beginning of *My Sassy Girl*.

Kim Dae-Jung was elected to the presidency in 1998 in the midst of this unprecedented financial crisis and began vigorous economic reforms recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). President Kim also pushed forward reconciliation with North Korea through what came to be known as the Sunshine Policy. This peaceful cooperation and open-ended engagement with the North (with no set formulas for reunification) resulted in the inter-Korean summit meeting in Pyongyang in 2000.[2] During the presidency of Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2003), South Koreans strived to pull their country back from the brink of bankruptcy. Ironically, while South Korea underwent economic depression, its popular culture enjoyed enormous popularity across many Asian countries. “Hallyu,” whose literal meaning is the Korean Wave, refers to this recent cultural phenomenon since the late 1990s, in which South Korea’s popular culture products such as music, films, and TV soap operas have been sensationally popular across national borders throughout Asia. Coinciding with this transnational cultural flow, Jun turned into a popular icon not only in Korea but also in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan after the huge commercial success of the film, *My Sassy Girl* (2001),[3] in these countries.

Jun’s film career includes eight films thus far: *White Valentine* [*Hwait’u Pallent’ain*] (1999), *Il Mare* [*Siwolae*] (2000), *My Sassy Girl* [*Yopkijogin Kunyo*] (2001), *The Uninvited* [*Sainyong Sikt’ak*] (2003), *Windstruck* [*Nae Yoja Ch’ingurul Sogaehamnida*] (2004), *Daisy* [*Teiji*] (2006), *If I Were Superman* [*Sup’omaeniotton Sanai*] (2008), and *Blood: The Last Vampire* [*Pulloodu: Lastu Paemp’aio*] (2008). The majority of these films are romantic comedies or melodramas with the exception of a horror film, *The Uninvited*, and an action-horror hybrid, *Blood: The Last Vampire*. [4] Jun’s romantic comedies and melodramas figure prominently into the construction of her star persona as both a sassy and pure-hearted girl. In this article, I incorporate textual analyses of Jun’s star image with the life experiences of actual audiences.

I utilize focus group interviews with one group of Korean women in their twenties living in Seoul, Korea and one group of Korean-American women in their twenties living in Kansas, USA. One interview was conducted in Seoul, Korea in July 2006 and the other interview was conducted in Lawrence, Kansas in February 2007. I assembled clips from the films in which Jun starred and screened them before each interview, which lasted approximately two and a half hours. The demographic information along with brief descriptions of each participant in the two focus groups is provided in the appendix. While I have changed the names of the interviewees to protect anonymity, I have maintained the respondents’ ethnicity that they self-reported in the questionnaire. The interviewees paid much attention to Jun’s body images in the context of contemporary consumerist society. A more in-depth analysis of the focus groups in regards to Jun’s star image can be found in my doctoral dissertation, *Seeing Stars: Female Film Stars and Female Audiences in Post-colonial Korea*.

## Sassy and quirky: re-gendering femininity

What distinguishes Jun Ji-Hyun from most of the female film stars from previous eras in Korea and Asia is that Jun’s characters reverse gender expectations through their “sassy” and “quirky” personalities.[5] *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* primarily construct her on-screen image as this sassy and quirky girl. Moreover, after the commercial success of *My Sassy Girl* Jun starred in numerous television commercials in which she portrayed a loud, physical, and domineering girl based on her “sassy” girl image. Jun Ji-Hyun’s image in these two films and television commercials radically differs from the virtuous female type (e.g., the obedient, self-sacrificial, self-effacing female),





The reversal of gender expectations: Jun's character physically surpasses her boyfriend at sports.

which both Korean society and Korean cinema have upheld for a long time. Thus her on-screen persona created a variety of debates about whether it signified a new subversive female type in Korea.

*My Sassy Girl* is based on a series of stories that a college student uploaded to the "humor board" of a website in 1999 in Korea. In this boy-meets-girl story, the author recounts his own dating saga with his "quirky" girlfriend through first-person narration. This story, based on true incidents and written by an amateur writer, became phenomenally popular among Internet users in Korea. [6] It was adapted into a film in 2001 with Jun Ji-Hyun playing the role of the "sassy" girlfriend. [7] Both the writer of the original story and the filmmakers refer to Jun's character only as "she." In the beginning of the film, the male character, Kyun-Woo, sees Jun's drunken and staggering character in a subway, where she throws up on another passenger. Before she passes out, she turns toward Kyun-Woo, calling him "honey." Although a stranger to her, Kyun-Woo plays along as her boyfriend and carries her to a motel. The next day, "she" calls his cell phone and suggests they meet. In the scene where they meet, she talks to him in a very authoritative and non-apologetic way: "What do you want to eat?" "What happened last night? Stop mumbling!" "You pay for my drink." She even interferes with two older men sitting with teenage girls at a nearby table, saying, "Having fun, huh? Don't you have a daughter? Why do you live a life like that?" (Kwak Jae-Yong, 2001).



The screenplays "she" writes also convey the reversal of gender roles.





The eccentric dating saga: Kyun-Woo and “she” display personalities that run contrary to gender norms in Korean and Asian societies.

Kyun-Woo finds her attractive in spite of her “quirky” personality. What he likes about her is her long straight hair and her flashes of femininity. However, this young couple displays reversed gender roles during their unconventional courtship. Jun’s character not only takes the lead in their relationship through her authoritative mode of speaking but she also physically surpasses him at sports such as racquetball and fencing. Moreover, her behavior (e.g., drinking heavily, passing out in the middle of the street, and often hitting and kicking Kyun-Woo) runs contrary to Korean gender norms in which a girl is expected to carry herself with grace and decency. This reversal of gender norms also applies to Kyun-Woo, who appears effeminate and submissive — characteristics often attributed to women in Korean society. Kyun-Woo tells the audience about being raised as a girl (e.g., wearing girl’s clothes) because his parents wanted a daughter. Moreover, he takes orders from Jun’s character, does whatever she tells him, and never makes any sexual advances to Jun’s character throughout the film.

The fictional stories that Jun’s character creates in the film also convey this reversal of gender expectations. “She,” an aspiring screenwriter, tells Kyun-Woo about the screenplays she writes and the film visualizes these stories in its narrative. In her first scenario, which is a parody of *The Terminator*, Jun Ji-Hyun plays the role of the female warrior who comes from the future to save her helpless boyfriend, Kyun-Woo.



In one of "her" screenplays, Jun plays a female terminator-type who comes from the future to save her kidnapped boyfriend.



In another screenplay, Jun stars as a time-traveling warrior and bounty hunter. Its visualization and use of music evoke the Hong Kong martial-arts film, *Ashes of Time* (Wong Kar-Wai, 1994).

Her second screenplay is an adaptation from a famous Korean short novel, *Shower*, which is a beautiful story about platonic love between a teenage girl and boy. The story ends with the death of the girl, whose last wish is to be buried with the shirt that she wore when the boy carried her on his back. Maintaining that the original ending is too old-fashioned, Jun's character argues for the girl's burial to include the (still living) boy rather than the shirt. Her shockingly "sassy" imagination is also evident in her third screenplay in which she stars as a time-traveling samurai from the future. She dresses like a man, and brutally kills a character played by Kyun-Woo at the final duel scene.

Produced after the huge success of *My Sassy Girl* in many Asian countries, *Windstruck* similarly reverses gender roles. Korean and Hong Kong film companies co-produced *Windstruck* in the hope of bigger box-office receipts in Asia by capitalizing on the status of Jun Ji-Hyun as a national celebrity in these countries.[8] The director of *My Sassy Girl*, Kwak Jae-Yong, wrote the role of Kyung-Jin in *Windstruck* for Jun Ji-Hyun. While the film primarily relies on Jun's star image, she plays the role of a "quirky" female police officer, Kyung-Jin.

The film centers on the idiosyncratic happenings in a love story between Kyung-Jin and Myung-Woo, who is a physics teacher in an all-girls high school. One day, Kyung-Jin mistakenly arrests him as a pickpocket. Dragged to the police station, the innocent Myung-Woo asks her to apologize to him. She unabashedly retorts,

"The word apology is not in my dictionary. If you want to hear me saying, 'I'm sorry,' change your name to 'I'm sorry'" (Kwak, 2003).

A few days later, Myung-Woo comes across her again in the police station while disciplining juvenile delinquents from his school. Kyung-Jin handcuffs him to her body so that they can go after a suspicious drug trafficker, and in the process Myung-Woo and Kyung-Jin gradually fall in love. Myung-Woo is concerned about the safety of his "quirky" girlfriend while she is on duty and therefore he voluntarily follows her during her patrol in order to protect her. Yet, he often finds himself in danger and in need of his girlfriend to rescue him. Ultimately, Myung-Woo dies during his volunteer police duty after Kyung Jin shoots him by mistake. The sad and distressed Kyung-Jin wanders around and eventually bumps into a man, played by the same actor that played the role of Kyun-Woo in *My Sassy Girl* and in this sense *Windstruck* serves as a prequel to *My Sassy Girl*.

*Windstruck* demonstrates the reversal of gender expectations in the same manner as in *My Sassy Girl*. Kyung-Jin is not at all a desirable feminine



*Windstruck* poster (Korea): Co-produced by Korean and Hong Kong film companies, *Windstruck* (2004) primarily relies on Jun's star images and her transnational stardom in Asia.



僕の彼女を  
紹介します 12月11日(土) 丸の内アラゼー各館全国先行・真昼系でロードショー

*Windstruck* poster (Japan): *Windstruck* did particularly well at the box-office in Japan.

character in the traditional sense. She is a “quirky” tomboy who is as reckless and “sassy” as Jun’s character in *My Sassy Girl*. She is loud and violent, often using her physical power. In contrast, her boyfriend, Myung-Woo, is effeminate, weak, and submissive. His romantic personality puts him in danger regardless of his intention to protect his girlfriend. He loves his “quirky” girlfriend and is likely to do anything for her. In this regard, the gender roles portrayed in *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* challenge the characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity in Korean society as well as in Asian societies in general.



Jun portrays a “sassy” and “quirky” police officer in *Windstruck*. She mistakenly arrests Myung-Woo as a pickpocket in the beginning of the film.



*Windstruck* reverses traditional gender expectations in the same manner as in *My Sassy Girl*.



Jun’s character cries over her boyfriend’s dead body after she shoots him by mistake in *Windstruck*.



Jun’s character in *Windstruck* represents a violent, reckless, and physically strong woman.



The film’s “gender instability” may destabilize gender relations within current Asian social orders.

The Korean scholar, Kim Hyun-Mi, argues that the reversal of gender roles in the Korean Wave reflects a notion of “gender instability” that characterizes the experience of a new modern sensibility in contemporary Asia. According to Kim, the Korean Wave is a cultural phenomenon that manifests the strong desires of Asian people to destabilize and change gender relations within their current social orders.[9] Seen in this view, Jun Ji-Hyun may appeal to audiences across Asia because of her persona as a “sassy” and “quirky” girl, which is at odds with the traditional gender expectation in Korea and in Asian countries. Indeed, the male characters in Jun’s films represent romantic, sensitive, and loyal boyfriends who are far from the image of a martial and productive Korean male promoted by the previous military regimes.





The policewoman's tough, reckless exterior contrasts with her soft, feminine interior. While we don't know who actually shot her boyfriend, *Windstruck* uses melodramatic conventions to focus on her emotional breakdown resulting from his death.

Yet, it is a mistake to consider Jun's star image as a step forward in terms of presenting a strong and autonomous female subject. While Jun's characters ostensibly reverse established gender norms, her on-screen persona still embodies a stereotypical female role. For instance, the characters she plays always display physical beauty with her thin, feminine body and her long straight hair, which is her trademark. Moreover, the narratives of her films repeatedly reinforce her images as a pure girl emphasizing her feminine quality underneath her "quirky" personality. Jun's films juxtapose characters with tough, reckless exteriors and soft, feminine interiors.[10] Jun's "quirky" personality in *My Sassy Girl*, in fact, masks the grief and heartbreak resulting from the death of her former boyfriend. Thus, the film portrays conflicting notions of femininity while utilizing the different generic conventions of comedy and melodrama. The scenes, which serve to reverse gender expectations, tend to exaggerate the sassiness of Jun's character towards comical effects. On the other hand, the scenes, which demonstrate the feminine side of Jun's character, are likely to emphasize the melodramatic aspects of her mourning for the dead ex-boyfriend. In this sense, the mixture of the two film genres, comedy and melodrama, enables this implausible coexistence of the two different female types within Jun's character.[11]



*My Sassy Girl's* narrative constructs Jun's character as a pure girl who is soft and feminine inside and who has not recovered from the death of her former boyfriend.

The awkward coexistence of conflicting notions of femininity functions to prevent Jun's characters from maturing into a woman in these films. For instance, Jun's character in *My Sassy Girl* remains a tomboy-like girl who never recovers from the traumatic experience of losing her boyfriend. Furthermore, *Windstruck* utilizes the conventions of a weepy melodrama in a more blatant way. The film forces Kyung-Jin (Jun) to deal with two traumatic experiences: first, the death of her twin sister; second, the death of her boyfriend, Myung-Woo. The film's narrative focuses on Kyung-Jin's emotional breakdown and vulnerability instead of her recuperating and moving on with her life.[12] Therefore, the seemingly reversed gender roles in *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* fail to truly overturn the gender stereotypes due to their conflicts with Jun's image as a pure girl who is inherently soft and feminine and who has not recovered from her lost love.



*My Sassy Girl* emphasizes Jun's character's physical beauty and feminine qualities underneath her "sassy" and "quirky" exterior.

## Perpetually pure-hearted: re-claiming virginity

The presence of a non-sexual immature love relationship is a dominant characteristic of the films in which Jun has starred. Unlike Hollywood romantic comedies, Jun's characters in the romantic comedies *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* have no sexual relationship of any kind (i.e., kissing, sex). As the Korean film scholar, Soyoung Kim, correctly observes, *Windstruck* seems reluctant to engage Myung-Woo and Kyung-Jin (Jun), who are in their twenties, in a sexual way. Kim takes an example from a scene in which Myung-Woo tries to kiss Kyung-Jin (Jun) and Kyung-Jin stops him by putting a burning stick to his lips. Kim claims that this "inscrutable purity" makes it difficult to consider Jun's character realistic. Therefore, the reversed gender roles in both *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* result in "much ado about nothing" between a "sassy" girl and her effeminate boyfriend, while not having much to do with subversive meaning for gender politics in Korea.[13]



Virginal images of Jun Ji-Hyun: Jun's character puts a burning stick to her boyfriend's lips as he tries to kiss her in *Windstruck*.



Jun's debut film, *White Valentine* (1999), also constructs Jun's images

*White Valentine*, *Il Mare*, and *Daisy* are all examples of films sharing this characteristic of a pure-hearted, virginal image of Jun. Jun Ji-Hyun's debut film, *White Valentine*, tells a story of an 18-year old girl, Jung-Min, and a twenty-something man, Hyun-Jin. Jun Ji-Hyun plays the role of Jung-Min, who has quit high school to teach herself painting. One day, a white pigeon flies into her window with a love letter on its foot. Jung-Min replies to the anonymous man without knowing either the letter's writer or intended recipient. In fact, the letter is from Hyun-Jin, who writes messages to his dead girlfriend. Jung-Min and Hyun-Jin gradually fall in love while exchanging letters using the white pigeon. In this fairytale story, Jun's character draws paintings in a park, takes care of a lost puppy, and helps her grandfather run a small bookstore. Yet, these pure-hearted actions contrast with Jung-Min's feeling of sorrow resulting from the death of her parents when she was young. *White Valentine* shares characteristics with *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck* in that Jun's characters in these films suffer traumatic experiences in their lives and these characters do not have sexual relationships.



as a pure-hearted girl who develops a non-sexual immature love relationship with the film's male protagonist.



Jun plays an 18-year old girl who teaches herself painting in *White Valentine*. The film reinforces Jun's virginal image through the girl's pure-hearted actions such as exchanging letters with an anonymous man via a white carrier pigeon.

*Il Mare*[14] is a time-travel narrative that reinforces the image of Jun as an innocent and lonely girl who has not recovered from her lost love. Jun's character, Eun-Joo, moves out of a house standing alone by the sea, which is called "Il Mare." She leaves a message in the mailbox, which asks for the forwarding of her letters to her new address in the hope of receiving a letter from her ex-boyfriend. Mysteriously, the message reaches Sung-Hyun, who lived in "Il Mare" two years ago. Eun-Joo and Sung-Hyun come to believe that there is a rupture in the fabric of time that allows them to communicate through the mailbox. The two continue to keep each other company through their letters and fall in love. Eun-Joo later discovers that Sung-Hyun died two years ago from a car accident inadvertently caused by her. She hurriedly puts her last letter in the mailbox in the hope that the letter will reach him before he leaves. The film ends with the scene in which Sung-Hyun visits Eun-Joo on the day of her moving into "Il Mare," saying "I have a very long story to tell you" (Lee Hyun-Seung, 2000). Jun Ji-Hyun's character in this film is so pure-hearted that she cannot forget her ex-boyfriend even though he has betrayed her. Once more, she finds love through adolescent-like act of exchanging letters and only expresses her love in a non-sexual way.



*Il Mare* poster (Korea): Jun's second film, *Il Mare* (2000), continues to construct her image as innocent.

*Daisy* is another example that perpetuates Jun's image as a pure-hearted girl. Set in Amsterdam, *Daisy* tells a story of a love triangle between three Koreans. Jun plays a twenty-four-year old woman named Hye-Young who has never been in a romantic relationship. On weekends, she works as a street artist, painting portraits of tourists in a picturesque square. An anonymous admirer delivers daisies to her every day. Being curious about who is sending daisies to her, she dreams of meeting the anonymous man someday. One day, she meets Jeong-Woo, who asks her to paint his portrait. Jeong-Woo is an Interpol officer who is investigating drug trafficking between Europe and Asia. Hye-Young falls for him mistakenly thinking that he is the anonymous man. In fact, that person is a





*Mare* tells a story of two people who live two years apart and who fall in love while exchanging letters through a mysterious mailbox that enables them to communicate across time. The original Korean title is *Love Across Time*.

contract killer, Park Yi, who has been watching and sending her daisies. For him, Hye-Young represents a “pure soul” as opposed to his tainted soul. Yet he only watches her from a distance. The tragedy develops as the police officer and the killer both fall in love with Jun’s character. Just as in the previous films, in *Daisy* Jun Ji-Hyun portrays a pure-hearted girl who is waiting for true love. Her pure soul leads her to wait for the anonymous man whom she has never met. Even though she gets involved with two men who love her, the audience never sees her having a romantic or sexual relationship with either man. Despite the fact that the primary audience for Jun’s films may be younger audiences, it is significant that a young female character in romantic comedies and melodramas uniformly portrays a virgin since romantic and sexual relationships are central to these genres.

The topic of Jun’s virginal images generated much discussion during my focus group interviews. While referring to *Daisy*, Amy, a twenty-five-year old Korean-American interviewee, wondered,

“She (Jun Ji-Hyun) portrays a twenty-four or twenty-five year old girl, but she has never been in a relationship. Is that common in Korea to be twenty-four years old and, I mean...it’s just unrealistic. I think my mother would want me to be like her (laughs).”

As Carrie said, “Jun Ji-Hyun is not portrayed as a sex object in films,” Helen, who is more familiar with Jun, explains,

“She is a *virgin*,<sup>[15]</sup> you know....I think her virginity has some sort of appeal to Korean men or Asian men....I can’t understand...why are Asian men so obsessed with virginity?”



데이지

*Daisy* poster (Korea): *Daisy* (2006) was a co-production by Hong Kong and Korean film companies, in which multi-national casts and crew members participated. A Hong Kong director, Andrew Lau (who is most famous for the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy), directed the film.



Jun portrays an innocent street artist living in Amsterdam in *Daisy*. She is curious about an anonymous admirer who delivers daisies to her every day. *Daisy* reduces Jun’s character to a virginal body to be looked at by the male characters.

When asked about this desexualized representation of Jun’s characters, the



Daisy poster (Hong Kong)



Daisy poster (Taiwan)

Korean women maintained that Jun's virginal purity appealed primarily to male audiences in Korea and her films functioned to serve male fantasies. According to Tae-Hee who is a twenty-one-year old college student,

"[Jun's] innocence, inexperience, and immaturity function to fulfill male fantasies. You know, all the Korean men want their girlfriends or wives to be virgins even when they are not virgins themselves." [16]

Yu-Mi, who wants to become a screenwriter, added, "Mostly, all the writers and directors are men in Korea. So, it's natural that the films reflect male fantasies." Hyun-Su, a twenty-one-year old college student, touched on the appeal of Jun's sexual purity to Korean male audiences:

"Korean men have this obsession about their own women's virginity. I believe Jun's purity has a kind of symbolic meaning. Symbolically Jun needs to have that virginal purity so that the male audiences can keep fantasizing about her and maybe about their future wives, too."

Sung-Ah, a twenty-three year old college student, even interpreted the effeminate representation of male characters in Jun's films as being in the service of male fantasies:

"Kyun-Woo and the male characters [in the films] are not so masculine, you know, [but rather are] emasculate and weak. That is also to serve male fantasies, I mean, the male audiences' fantasies. If the male characters are very masculine and sexually attractive, it would be difficult for the male audiences to fantasize about Jun as a pure, innocent girl. She should not have any sexual desires."

Why, then, might Jun's characters' sexual purity be appealing to Korean/Asian audiences? I argue that the underlying fantasy appeal of Jun's virginal body is intrinsically connected to the discourses on the female body inscribed by neo-Confucian traditions.[17] During the Choson dynasty (1392-1910) the ruling class established neo-Confucianism as a state ideology and code of conduct for both men and women in Korea. In contemporary times, South Korea's entrance into a post-industrial consumer society has generally improved the socio-economic status of women, but the ideology of neo-Confucianism still plays an important role in the continuing control of women's bodies.

An explanation of the impact of neo-Confucianism on contemporary gender roles in Korean society necessitates an understanding of *qi* concept — a material force which flows through all things giving them form and vitality. Since *qi* exists in everything, from the whole universe to the tiniest dust particle, "the many are ultimately One" and thus there is no distinction between the self and the universe.[18] Neo-Confucian texts consistently encourage individuals to

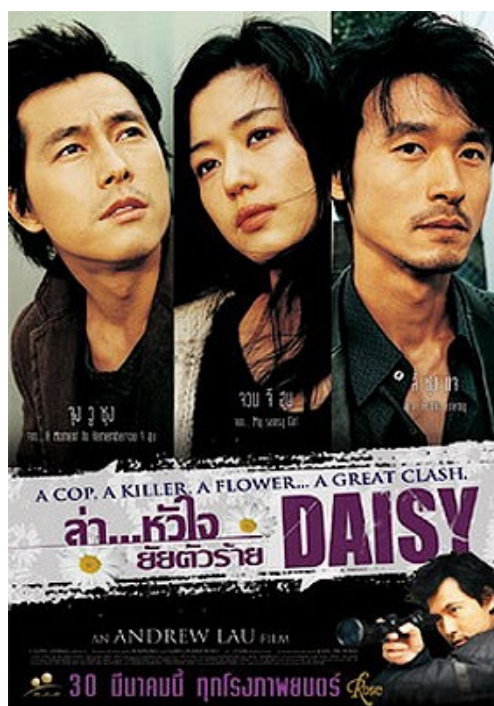
"lose the consciousness of the self and to enter a state of selflessness where the self becomes subsumed into the family, the community and, finally, the universe, thereby achieving the ultimate goal of sagehood." [19]

However, only men were expected to pursue this ideal of selfless subjectivity. Neo-Confucianism incorporated the discourse of *yin* and *yang*, which were paired complementary opposites whose interactions kept the world in balance. *Yin* was associated with the feminine, the passive, the negative, and the weak while *yang* was associated with the opposite qualities and forces (i.e., the masculine, the active, the positive, the strong). Neo-Confucian scholars created a hierarchical gender relation based on this "natural order" of things and





Daisy poster (Japan)



Daisy poster (Thailand)

situated *yang*, i.e., men, as the dominant and more important gender. While men's primary role was to cultivate themselves through the mind and body and eventually transcend their bodies, women, as an inferior gender, functioned to maintain and reproduce the family line through their corporeal bodies. As a result, this tradition created the idea of women as bodies more than subjects, and reinforced the concept of women as primarily physical bodies.[20] This emphasis on disciplining and controlling women's bodies was central to neo-Confucianism because these bodies were so valuable due to their potential capacity to bear children (particularly boys).

The neo-Confucian notion of the female body (with its emphasis on the corporeal) continues to hold true in contemporary Korean society in general and in Jun Ji-Hyun's on-screen images in particular. Jun's body should be preserved physically pure for the sake of her potential for child bearing because she may be progressing towards the roles of wife and mother. Unlike Hollywood romantic comedies (whose narratives center around female protagonists' search for "Mr. Right"), Jun's films focus on retarding the situation and/or the moment of finding a romantic partner, i.e., her "Mr. Right." The effeminate male characters in Jun's films function to delay the meeting of Jun with her romantic partner while simultaneously providing comical effects. As the Korean interviewee, Sung-Ah, has pointed out, Jun's films do not allow Jun's characters to have any sexual desires towards the male characters. The fact that the audience never gets to see any sexual relationship between Jun's characters and the male characters serves to construct Jun's images as a pure/virginal body rather than a subject. It is significant that *My Sassy Girl*, which transformed Jun Ji-Hyun into one of the most popular icons in Asia, endows no name to Jun's character in the film. Jun Ji-Hyun is reduced to a body but this body is so valuable and appealing because she represents a desirable wife-to-be or wife-in-progress from a standpoint of the long-standing neo-Confucian ideology.

[Go to page 2](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Impossibility of the female gaze



The male protagonist of *Il Mare* can gaze upon Jun's character but not vice versa. ...

The current social order in Korea, based on capitalist patriarchy and the nuclear family, reifies the subordination of the female under an individual male's control as his personal property. Yet, at the same time, the ideology of neo-Confucianism continues to operate and reinforce female stereotypes in Korean cinema. The neo-Confucian ideal of the corporeal for the female body transforms into discourses on virginity while reflecting a situation (e.g., women's position, status) in which women become men's personal property under individual male's control.

This female subordination constructs looking mechanisms in film. I argue that the gender relation within capitalist patriarchy facilitates and legitimizes a male gaze that objectifies the female for the benefit of masculine visual pleasure. Jun Ji-Hyun's on-screen images are consistently presented through the point-of-view of male characters in her films. The films' narratives attribute to-be-looked-at-ness to Jun's characters through a male character's voice-over narration or a voyeuristic male gaze. The male gaze in Jun's films also functions to perpetuate Jun's innocence. A focus on looking relations in three films (*Il Mare*, *My Sassy Girl*, *Daisy*) illustrates how the male gaze constructs Jun's persona as a pure girl.



The film's narrative does not confer Jun's character the agency to identify him and return the gaze.

As described above, there is a two-year gap between Eun-Joo (Jun) and Sung-Hyun's timelines in *Il Mare*. At one point, Eun-Joo tells Sung-Hyun that she regularly waited for the subway train at a particular place two years ago. Sung-Hyun goes to the subway platform and observes her but she cannot recognize him because, from her point of view and timeline, they have not yet met. Therefore, Sung-Hyun can look at her but not vice versa. This dynamic is also apparent in the scene where Sung-Hyun is hit by a car and dies in the street on the way to stop Eun-Joo's boyfriend from leaving her. Eun-Joo sees him dying but she cannot recognize him. The narrative does not afford her the agency to identify him.



Jun's character sees Sung-Hyun dying but she cannot recognize him.

Furthermore, in the last scene in which Eun-Joo and Sung-Hyun actually meet

for the first time, she has no idea who he is or what he is going to tell her. On the contrary, Sung-Hyun knows all about the letter exchange, her ex-boyfriend, the car accident, and the fact that she loves him too. Throughout the film, the audience hears voice-over narration from both Sung-Hyun and Eun-Joo. Yet, only Sung-Hyun can gaze upon Eun-Joo. Moreover, Sung-Hyun's last line, "I have a very long story to tell you," confers him the status of the storyteller of their relationship. In this sense, Eun-Joo not only lacks a gaze but also takes up the position as a passive listener of her own love story.



Jun's character becomes a passive listener of her own love story in the last scene.



"Who are you?"



"I have a very long story to tell you."

The male protagonist plays a more blatant role of storyteller in *My Sassy Girl* from the beginning of the film. The audience experiences the sassiness and hidden vulnerability of Jun's character as Kyun-Woo tells the story of their relationship through first-person narration. Moreover, *My Sassy Girl* situates the male as a bearer of the gaze and the female as the object of the gaze. For instance, while holding Jun's drunken character in his arms, Kyun-Woo puts medicine in her mouth to wake her up and wipes her mouth. Then, the camera pans to the left, and frames her body (e.g., her closed eyes, nose, lips, neck, and then breasts under her pink shirt) in close up, which functions as Kyun-Woo's point-of-view shot. He thinks that she is his ideal type when she is asleep, thus passive and tame.



Jun's character becomes Kyun-Woo's ideal type when she is asleep with her eyes closed in *My Sassy Girl*.



Shots from Kyun-Woo's point-of-view

In addition, when Kyun-Woo showers in the motel while Jun's character sleeps, the audience sees the rear side of his naked body through a transparent glass door. However, the male body is not presented romantically through a female point-of-view because the female character (Jun's character) is "literally" asleep. Therefore, the film reproduces the convention of male gaze, which the female character is unable to reciprocate.[21][[open endnotes in new window](#)]



The lack of female gaze compromises the seemingly reversed gender roles in the film's narrative. However weak and submissive he may be, Kyun-Woo himself tells the audience about his unusual effeminate personality in juxtaposition to the quirkiness of his girlfriend. In contrast, Jun's character is subject to Kyun-Woo's constant observation and evaluation. Furthermore, as discussed previously, the vulnerability of the male (i.e., his naked body) is unmediated by a female gaze. This conventional storytelling from a male point-of-view signifies the seemingly strong and new female character type is dependent upon the acknowledgement and acceptance of the male.

The male gaze in *Daisy* more openly reveals the voyeuristic desire of the male protagonist than the two films discussed previously (i.e., *Il Mare* and *My Sassy Girl*). The contract killer, Park Yi, falls in love with Hye-Young (Jun) after seeing her painting daisies in the countryside, and begins sending her daisies. He rents an apartment overlooking the square where Hye-Young paints portraits for tourists, and observes her through a telephoto lens while fantasizing about her purity. However, the entrance of the detective, Jeong-Woo, in the frame interrupts Park Yi's fantasy and results in Park Yi pointing a gun at him.

In *My Sassy Girl*, Kyun-Woo's naked body is unmediated by a female gaze because Jun's character is asleep.



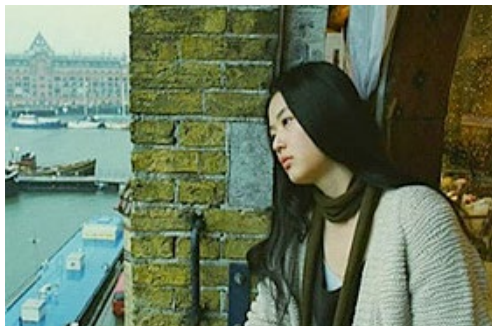


The contract killer, Park Yi, observes Jun's character in the square from his apartment in *Daisy*.



Park Yi points a gun at the detective, Jeong-Woo, when he enters the frame and interacts with Jun's character, followed by Park Yi's point-of-view shot.

While Jeong-Woo uses Hye-Young in order to disguise himself as a tourist whose portrait is being painted, Hye-Young mistakes him as the anonymous man for whom she has been waiting. The voice-over narration of these three characters propels the film's narrative, but Hye-Young is the only person who does not know the truth. Jeong-Woo knows that he is not Hye-Young's anonymous man. Yet, he pretends to be that man in order to keep using her for his investigation. Hye-Young's misperception results from her inability to reciprocate the anonymous man's gaze. Later in the film, she even loses her voice as a result of a throat wound that occurs during a gun battle in the square. Lacking both gaze and voice, she does nothing but wait for Jeong-Woo, who has been transferred from Amsterdam to Korea. Park Yi takes care of the sorrow-stricken Hye-Young as a friend. At the narrative's conclusion, when Hye-Young discovers that it is Park Yi who sent daisies to her, she is shot and killed in the square while trying to tell him that she "knows." In other words, as soon as she becomes able to return the gaze, she is killed off.



*Daisy*: Jun's lack of female gaze...

The fact that Jun's characters' fail to return the male gaze perpetuates her star image as a pure girl. Jun's characters remain pure and innocent as long as the male characters maintain a safe distance that allows them to enjoy voyeuristic pleasure. Linda Williams in her article, "When the Woman Looks," points to the fact that many of the "good girl" heroines of U.S. silent films were often figuratively, or literally, blind. She claims that blindness allows the male protagonist to look at the female "with no danger that she will return that look and in so doing express desires of her own." [22] Williams' argument holds true in the above three films as well, in the sense that Jun's characters are figuratively blind, thus maintaining the pure "good girl" image. Although Eun-Joo comes across Sung-Hyun several times in *Il Mare*, she cannot "see" him. In *My Sassy Girl*, Jun's character turns into Kyun-Woo's ideal type only when she is asleep with her eyes closed. It is no surprise, then, that Hye-Young is killed off



... and voice function to perpetuate her innocence and purity.



The heroine is killed off at the end of *Daisy* as she is about to return the gaze and express her desires.

in *Daisy* when she finally can “see” whom her true love is. If “to see is to desire,” as Williams argues,[23] Hye-Young needs to die before she expresses any desires so that she remains a pure soul to the male protagonist and to the audience.

## Jun’s transnational stardom in Asia: re-centering globalization

After Jun became a bankable star in Asian countries, she starred in both films and many television commercials that continued to sell her star image in the region. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Hollywood’s domination of the Asian film/media market began to diminish while Hong Kong martial arts films, and Japanese films and television shows gained popularity in Asian countries. Since the late 1990s, however, South Korea has become a new media center, replacing the cultural hegemony of Hong Kong and Japan in Asia. Throughout Southeast and East Asia, Korean popular culture has become a new global force. It not only sells its own products (e.g., films, TV shows and CDs) but also sells Korean ways of life (e.g., fashion, food and cultural values).[24][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Jun Ji-Hyun’s transnational stardom coincides with this changing hegemony in the Asian cultural scene. Moon Hye-Joo, the director of the overseas marketing team in “Cinema Service,” (one of the major film distribution companies in Korea) analyzes Jun’s transnational stardom in Asia as follows:

“These days, the images of South Korea among Asian people in the region center around its consumerism, sensitivity to fashion, and its role as a leader of cultural trends. Jun Ji-Hyun seems to represent these dynamic images of South Korean culture.”[25]

The interviewees in my focus groups discussed the popular appeal of Jun Ji-Hyun across Asia. When talking about Jun’s transnational stardom, the Korean American women focused on her physical traits. Their responses include:

“She is very pretty. [She is a] typical Asian woman that I imagine. She does have a really nice hair. Her skin is flawless” (Helen);

“She is very pretty... pure, you know, like an innocent Asian girl” (Kate).



[“Elastine” hair products TV commercial \(Korea\): Jun's body images represent a melding of Western and Asian cultures. Click on link to see video.](#)

Throughout the interview process, the Korean American respondents tended to express stereotypical views of Asian women while describing Jun’s images or characters using such words as “innocent,” “reserved,” and “soft.” They often times utilized the term, “Asian” in reference to Jun Ji-Hyun whereas the Korean women always referred to her as “Korean.” This indicates that Jun’s racial or ethnic identity is more prominent to Korean Americans rather than her nationality.

The Korean women discussed the duality of Jun’s images as the primary reason for her transnational stardom. For instance, Hyun-Su described Jun Ji-Hyun, saying,

“She has different images at the same time. From her neck up, I mean, her face is like a face of baby’s and is kind of oriental [tongyangjok]. Yet, her body is very thin, lean, long, sexy, and westernized.”

Tae-Hee had a similar comment to Hyun-Su’s and said,

“She does have a *strange* appeal because of her dualistic image. I



[“HuiYuan” orange juice commercial \(China\).](#) Click on link to see video.



[“Asience” hair products commercial \(Japan\).](#) Click on link to see video.

don't think she is pretty according to our traditional beauty standard but she looks oriental and simultaneously very western. I think her dualistic image appeals to her fans in Asia.”

These responses echo what Taeyon Kim observes in her article, *Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women's Bodies in Korea's Consumer Society*, in the tendencies in Korean women's magazines and journals in the last decade or so:

“A casual browser of Korean women's magazines might observe that many of the models or settings in the advertisements are Euro-American or look Euro-American. This image has become ever more pervasive. In June 1994, changes in laws allowed the Korean advertising industry to use foreign models and celebrities...which quickly led to a sharp increase in the use of foreign models to sell domestic wares...[N]ow even domestic products were marketed to Koreans by the likes of Cindy Crawford, Meg Ryan and Claudia Schiffer. While there does seem to have been a gradual increase in recent years of Korean models in domestic advertisements, these Korean models nearly all have features that have already been reconstructed to meet the prevailing standards of beauty which, if not totally white, are at least a melding of Asian and Western features, the ideal encapsulated by the increasingly popular ‘Eurasian’ look.”[26]

In this sense, Jun's hybrid image — her long straight hair and her face's oriental or Asian appearance combined with Western features such as a tall and thin body structure — makes her ideal for the changing standard of beauty in the context of intensified consumer culture in Korea and Asia. The idea of Jun as an Eurasian beauty also resonates with the concept of cultural proximity in contemporary Asia in an era of globalization. The Japanese media scholar, Iwabuchi Koichi, discusses the reason for and implications of the Japanese Wave during the mid 1990s as follows:

“Under the globalizing forces, cultural similarities and resonances in the region are newly articulated....For audiences in Asia, Japanese popular culture represents cultural similarities and a common experience of modernity in the region that is based on an ongoing negotiation between the West and the non-West experiences that American culture cannot represent.”[27]

Signifying the creation of a regional cultural manifestation against the long-term domination of U.S. culture, the rise of Japanese popular culture in Asia results from its ability to reassert Asian identity and/or sensibilities with which local fans in Asia could easily identify. Likewise, the popular appeal of Jun and the Korean Wave may represent a shared experience of capitalist modernity among Asian countries. Unlike Hollywood stars who are culturally and geographically remote, Jun Ji-Hyun embodies an accessible star whose images function to articulate common cultural experiences in Asia (e.g., a melding of Western and non-Western cultures) within the current globalization process. However, the notion of cultural commonality alone cannot sufficiently address the issues of why the culture of specific nations is preferred over others, what role the historical and local context plays in formulating such a phenomenon, and what role a particular star plays in the shared experience of transnational modernity. I will further discuss what Jun Ji-Hyun's star image and her



stardom signify in the context of the early 2000s across Asian countries in the following section.

### Jun's consuming body or consuming Jun's body: forming Pan-Asian citizenship

Statistics indicate that Jun's appearance in commercials has resulted in increased product sales by a large percentage, and thus, the "Jun Ji-Hyun effect" has come to be known in the world of television commercials.[28] Television viewers are familiar with Jun's images not only in Korea but in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan as well through her commercials for soft drinks, hair products, cosmetics, cameras, cell phones, etc.[29] There have been so many products that Jun Ji-Hyun endorses that a short comic story called "Jun Ji-Hyun's day," in which Jun uses those products all day long, was quite popular on the Internet.[30]

My interviewees were familiar with the fact that Jun had considerable commercial appeal in Korea and across Asia. The Korean women during the focus group interview pointed to a situation where Jun's body emerged as a channel that carried commercial concepts. According to Yu-Mi,

"(Jun's) *namelessness* in *My Sassy Girl* might have helped her status as a commercial star because she is not a specific individual but she and her body exist in order to *display* certain concepts or commercial products."

Bo-Yeon also expressed her view of the impact of capitalist consumerism on contemporary Korean society:

"You know, they say that 'the advertisement is the flower of capitalism' [Kwanggonun Chabonjuuiui Kkotsida].[31] We are always consuming images without realizing it. It's like breathing in air all the time. I've never thought Jun Ji-Hyun is pretty, but the



Jun's body as a channel or carrier of consumerism: In several scenes of *Windstruck*, Jun's character utilizes a number of commercial products that Jun endorses.



“Giordano,” the brand name of casual wear Jun endorses, is clearly visible on her T-shirt in a few scenes.



Jun's character eats a particular kind of yogurt Jun endorses in another scene. Despite the fact that *Windstruck* was often derided as “a two-hour long Jun Ji-Hyun commercial” in Korea, the film was popular among Jun's fans in other Asian countries.

overflowing images in films and television kind of force me to think that, ‘Oh, that virgin vamp image must be representing a positive female sexuality. I should be like Jun in order to be loved by men.’ It bothers me to think that we are indoctrinated by commercialism or consumerism, but it is true.”

These Korean women's understanding of Jun's body as a channel or carrier of consumerist ideas, along with the prominence and pervasiveness of images in contemporary popular culture, concurs with Bryan S. Turner's discussion about the transformation of a desiring body under capitalism, especially in late capitalist society. Turner maintains that socio-economic changes have brought about fundamental shifts in the understanding of the female body from a “reproductive body” in traditional, pre-industrial society, to a “labouring body” in the industrial period, and finally to a “consuming body” in the post-industrial stage.[32]. Jun Ji-Hyun's body indeed encapsulates the notion of the consuming body with the advent of intensified consumerist culture in Korea and Asia where women became more important as consumers than mothers or laborers shifting the utility of their bodies from re/production to consumption.

Whatever Jun's star image signifies — whether it's her “sassy” girl image, her virginity, her image as a typical innocent Asian girl, her Eurasian look, South Korea's vibrant urban culture, or sensitivity to fashion and cultural trends — her body as a commodity-sign functions to drive postmodern consumption practices in the current post-industrial stage. In other words, marked as a (Eurasian) body of gender instability, virginity, typical Asian beauty, or South Korea's cultural vibrancy through her films and commercials, the consumption of Jun's sign-value (embedded in various endorsed products) serves as a means for the acquisition of her sign-value. [33]. Therefore, Jun's consuming body or consuming her body (i.e., her sign-value) becomes a manifestation of changing social values and a formation of pan-Asian citizenship, particularly among the youth and the middle-class in the region in an era of globalization.

Most of my interviewees interpreted the star image of Jun Ji-Hyun as an ideal girlfriend type who is “good to hang out with” (Kate), who is “having a good time” (Elaine), and who may not be “suitable for a wife, but perfect to have fun with” (Tae-Hee). Although Jun's characters in her films hide deep sorrow emanating from traumatic experiences, this functions only to perpetuate Jun's image as a pure-hearted girl while justifying her characters' wacky actions. Formulated through lighthearted romantic comedies or conventional melodramas as well as television commercials, Jun's star persona seems free from the imperatives of Cold War ideology, anti-colonial nationalism, or the national struggle to rebuild modern South Korea and redefine its legitimate membership — all factors that contributed to the construction of female stars' images in previous eras. Liberated from the past master narratives of nation building, Jun's stardom marks a new era of cultural expression and mobile citizenry within Western consumerism and under globalizing forces.

Yet, the legacy of old ideology (e.g., neo-Confucianism) still lingers in Jun's star image. As discussed above, neo-Confucianism's emphasis on the corporeal body for the female builds on capitalist patriarchy (thus resulting in the voyeuristic, un-reciprocal male gaze upon Jun's virginal body), which in turn builds on consumerism and postmodern consumption practices. This commodified male gaze upon Jun's body, however, is not limited to the objectification of the female for the benefit of masculine visual pleasure. With neo-Confucian body techniques still operating, Jun is primarily constructed as a body rather than a subject, and this body is used to carry certain ideas or commercial values not only to male but also to female audiences/consumers across Asia with the advent of highly commercialized late-capitalist societies in the region. Therefore, through these processes of re-writing and over-writing, Jun's star

persona becomes a palimpsest of multiple layers of pre-modern neo-Confucian ideology and later-imported capitalist patriarchy, which are superimposed on Western consumerism and cultural regionalization under global capitalism.

[Go to Notes and Appendix on focus groups](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### Notes

1. Han-Kyo Kim, "Politics in South Korea Since 1993," in John H. Koo and Andrew C. Nahm, eds., *An Introduction to Korean Culture* (Hollym, 1997), 248-253. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. Michael Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History* (University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 179-80.
3. The Hollywood studio, 20th Century Fox, released a remake of this film under the same title, *My Sassy Girl*, in 2008 with Elisha Cuthbert in the starring role. A Japanese television series, *Ryoki Teki Na Kanojo* (2008), is also based on this popular Korean film.
4. Often labeled as the next Zhang Ziyi by the South Korean Media, Jun Ji-Hyun recently accepted the opportunity to star in the Hong Kong film, *Blood: The Last Vampire*. This film is based on a Japanese anime and scheduled to be released in American theaters in 2009.
5. The use of a word, "sassy," is to describe an opinionated, authoritative, and domineering quality of Jun's on-screen persona in *My Sassy Girl* and *Windstruck*. Likewise, "quirky" will be used to describe the eccentric, wacky, and unconventional nature of her persona in these films.
6. Sung Baek-Yup, "A Study of the Strong Woman Images in Korean Cinema," Unpublished Thesis (Seokang University, 2002), 29.
7. After the commercial success of *My Sassy Girl* the word "sassy" entered the cultural lexicon in Korea as a popular modifier in everyday life to describe things of any unconventional nature.
8. Park Eun-Young, "A Review of *Windstruck*," *Cine 21*, June 2004.
9. Kim Hyun-Mi, *Kullobol Sidaewi Munhwabonyok [Cultural Translation in a Global Age]* (Ttohanui Munhwa, 2006), 242-244.
10. Ko Jong-Suk, "A Review of *My Sassy Girl*," *Cine 21*, August 2001.
11. Sung Baek-Yup, 30-32.
12. Kim Min-Young, "Crying over Men, A Review of *Windstruck*," *Cine21*, July 2004.
13. Soyoung Kim, "A Critique of *Windstruck*," *Cine 21*, June 2004.
14. *The Lake House* (dir. Alejandro Agresti, 2006), in which Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves starred, is a Hollywood remake of this Korean film, *Il Mare* (2000).
15. The use of italics here indicates some form of special emphasis (e.g., tonal inflections) utilized by the respondent. The usage of italics in the transcripts hereafter, with the

exception of film titles, represents emphasis by the respondent.

16. The issue of translation needs to be addressed in any study that involves data collection in multiple languages. The focus group interview with the Korean-American women (group 1) was conducted in English while the Korean women (group 2) spoke Korean in the focus group interview session. While I tried to translate as directly as possible it would be remiss to not acknowledge that certain specificities may have been lost in translation. As a translator and a researcher I strive to focus on meaning in both the star image of Jun Ji-Hyun and the larger themes that emerge from the focus group interview data.

17. Neo-Confucianism (developed by Zhu Xi during the Song dynasty in China) is the term used to distinguish this belief system from the earlier form of Confucianism by Confucius and Mencius.

18. W. Theodore DeBary et al., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol 1. (Columbia University Press, 1960), 457.

19. Taeyon Kim provides the social and historical processes through which the notions of female body have been constructed in Korea in “Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women’s Bodies in Korea’s Consumer Society,” *Body and Society*, Vol. 9(2), 2003.

20. Ibid.

21. Sung Baek-Yup, 18. [[return to page 2](#)]

22. Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” in Mary Ann Doane, et al. eds., *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (American Film Institute, 1984), 83.

23. Ibid., 83.

24. Kim Hyun-Mi, 260-261.

25. Moon Suk, “Three Reports on Jun Ji-Hyun [3],” *Cine21*, June 2003.

26. Taeyon Kim, 103.

27. Iwabuchi Koichi, “From Western Gaze to Global Gaze: Japanese Cultural Presence in Asia,” in Diane Crane et.al. eds., *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization*, (Routledge, 2002), 270.

28. Park Mun-Ki, *Starwa CF* [Star Marketing] (Doonam, 2006), 100.

29. The products Jun endorses include *Coca Cola*, *Pantene* hair products, *Ponds* skin care products, *Olympus* cameras, *Samsung* cell phones, and *LG Telecom*.

30. Moon Suk, *Cine 21*.

31. This is a Korean phrase which means “advertisement represents the essence of capitalism.”

32. Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Sage Publications, 1996), 3-5.

33. I draw on the notion of sign-value in postmodern consumption practices from Arthur W. Frank, *For a Sociology of the Body: An Analytical Review*, in Mike Featherstone and Bryan

Turner, eds., *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (Sage Publications, 1991), 36-102.

## Bibliography

DeBary, W. Theodore, Wing-tsit Chan and Burton Watson, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. Vol. 1, New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.

Kim, Han-Kyo. "Politics in South Korea Since 1993," in John H. Koo and Andrew C. Nahm, eds., *An Introduction to Korean Culture*. Seoul: Hollym International Corp., 1997.

Kim, Hyun-Mi. *Kullobol Sidaewi Munhwabonyok [Cultural Translation in a Global Age]*, Seoul: Ttohanau Munhwa, 2006.

Kim, Min-Young. "Crying over Men, A Review of *Windstruck*," *Cine21*, July, 2004.  
[http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag\\_id=25087](http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag_id=25087) (accessed on 8/14/2006)

Kim, Soyoung. "A Critique of *Windstruck*," *Cine21*, June, 2004.  
[http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag\\_id=24653](http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag_id=24653) (accessed on 8/14/2006)

Kim, Taeyon, "Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women's Bodies in Korea's Consumer Society," *Body and Society*, Vol. 9(2), 2003.

Ko, Jong-Suk. "A Review of *My Sassy Girl*," *Cine21*, August, 2001.  
[http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag\\_id=3920](http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag_id=3920) (accessed on 8/14/2006)

Koichi, Iwabuchi. "From Western Gaze to Global Gaze: Japanese Cultural Presence in Asia," in Diane Crane, et al., eds., *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Moon, Suk. "Three Reports on Jun Ji-Hyun [3]," *Cine21*, June, 2003.  
[http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag\\_id=19623](http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag_id=19623) (accessed on 8/14/2006)

Park, Eun-Young. "A Review of *Windstruck*," *Cine21*, June, 2004.  
[http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag\\_id=24570](http://www.cine21.com/index/magazine.php?mag_id=24570) (accessed on 8/14/2006)

Park, Mun-Ki. *Starwa CF [Star Marketing]* Seoul: Dunam, 2006.

Robinson, Michael E. *Korea's Twentieth Century Odyssey: A Short History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007.

Sung, Baek-Yup. "A Study of the Strong Women Images in Korean Cinema," Thesis. Seo-Kang University, Korea, 2002.

Turner, Bryan S. *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*. 2nd Edition, London: Sage Publications, 1996.

Williams, Linda. "When the Woman Looks," in Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellemcamp, and Linda Williams, eds. *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984.

## Appendix

Group one (Korean American women in their twenties living in Kansas)



Name	Age	Ethnicity	Job	Marital status	Familiarity with Jun	Birthplace & language environment
Amy	25	Korean-American	Hair stylist	Single	Not familiar	She was adopted when she was two years old. She does not speak Korean.
Jennifer	20	Korean-Filipino-Mexican American	College student/ part time jobs	Single	Not familiar	She was born in the USA. She is in a Korean language class at KU and her mother is Korean.
Carrie	21	Korean	College student/ research assistant	Single	Not familiar	She was adopted when she was two and a half years old. She does not speak Korean.
Kate	20	Half Korean	College student	Single	She has seen <i>My Sassy Girl</i> .	She was born in the USA. She is in a Korean language class at KU and her mother is Korean.
Helen	20	Korean	College student	Single	She has seen <i>My Sassy Girl</i> , <i>Daisy</i> , <i>Windstruck</i>	She was born in the USA. She is from a Korean family and speaks Korean.
Elaine	20	Asian-Caucasian	College student	Single	She has heard of Jun.	She was born in the USA. She is in a Korean language class at KU and her mother is Korean.

Group two (Korean Women in their twenties living in Seoul, Korea)

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Job	Marital status	Jun's films they have seen	Familiarity with Jun's off-screen images
Bo-Yeon	22	Korean	College student	Single	<i>White Valentine</i> , <i>Il Mare</i> , <i>My Sassy Girl</i> , <i>Windstruck</i> , <i>The Uninvited</i>	She has read articles about Jun in newspapers and magazines. She has also seen TV soap operas and commercials in which Jun starred.
Jung-Mi	21	Korean	College student	Single	<i>My Sassy Girl</i> , <i>Windstruck</i> , <i>The Uninvited</i>	Same as above
Hyun-Su	21	Korean	College student	Single	<i>Il Mare</i> , <i>My Sassy Girl</i> , <i>Windstruck</i>	Same as above
Sung-Ah	23	Korean	College student	Single	<i>My Sassy Girl</i> , <i>Windstruck</i> , <i>The Uninvited</i> , <i>Daisy</i>	Same as above
Yu-Mi	21	Korean	College student	Single	<i>Il Mare</i> , <i>My Sassy Girl</i> , <i>Windstruck</i> ,	Same as above

					<i>The Uninvited, Daisy</i>	
Tae-Hee	21	Korean	College student	Single	<i>Il Mare, My Sassy Girl, Windstruck, The Uninvited</i>	Same as above

---

[To top](#)  
 [JC 51](#)  
 [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# Pornography and its critical reception: toward a theory of masturbation

by [Magnus Ullén](#)

Pornography was long considered a subject unworthy of academic attention. As a sub-category of the obscene, it was reckoned morally and/or intellectually unfit for interpretation almost by definition. To the extent that arts and humanities scholars dealt with it at all, they looked upon it as a species of “anti-literature, anti-art,” on the grounds that “the kind of form that art or literature must by nature take [...] is noxious to the idea of pornography.”[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Over the last three decades, however, academics have successfully challenged the notion that pornography and scholarly inquiry are incompatible. Not only has a growing body of increasingly sophisticated studies on the topic appeared, but the largely condemnatory stance of the first group of critics to take pornography seriously — critics like Andrea Dworkin, Catherine McKinnon, and Susanne Kappeler — has by and large been superseded by critics footed in queer theory as well as feminism. For these newer critics, pornography is simply a cultural discourse among others, and Laura Kipnis expresses an attitude typical among them:

“Pornography requires our interpretation, and in return [...] yields surprising eloquence.”[2]

The merit of these recent works is beyond question, yet they too arguably misrepresent their subject. If earlier critics had too little trust in pornography's eloquence of, the critics of the last three decades are making it speak rather too much. To put it succinctly, recent criticism tends ignore that while one certainly *can* interpret pornography, it by no means needs be interpreted to be enjoyed. As Laurence O'Toole perceptively remarks in *Pornocopia*,

“Beyond the arguments, perhaps it is really straightforward. You watch it, you get off, watch it again and get off; again, get off. What if, after all the bickering, it's as simple as that?”[3]



In one sense O'Toole is surely right: from a consumer's perspective, pornography does not carry much significance over and above itself. People most commonly use pornography as an aid for masturbation (or as an aid for sexual interaction with a partner), neither more nor less. It triggers a set of actions that we engage in while partaking of the discourse, and afterwards it is usually quickly forgotten. However, unlike O'Toole, I do not believe that the issue of pornography is at heart an uncomplicated one. On the contrary: the very fact that people enjoy pornography *sans* interpretation in itself presents a circumstance that calls for interpretation.[4]

I will be arguing in this essay that if one looks closely at the matter, porn's specificity is not that it departs contentwise from other genres. Many novels contain explicit sex without being branded pornography while, for instance, transsexual pornography rarely involves explicit sex but is labeled "porn" all the same. What makes pornography into porn, then, does not entail some specific content as much as on a recurrent mode of reception, one radically different from, say, a novel or a drama. While critics have valuably demonstrated that pornography has cultural significance, they have failed to emphasize one of its most important features. It is not so much pornography *per se* that needs analysis, but the way pornography is *read*. In other words: What are the essential characteristics of *the mode of reading* that pornography *typically* generates? What are the hermeneutical aspects of masturbation?

As it happens, we can easily delineate the essential characteristics of masturbation as a form of interpretation. Usually when we read, we ascribe significance to the text: the office of the reader is to produce the text's meaning — at least, that is how reading is usually taught in an academic discipline like comparative literature. This aesthetical mode of reading approaches the artwork as a means towards its own end, rather than as a means of satisfying our personal interest. Theoretically, it finds its justification in Kant who stresses the importance of disinterest for aesthetical contemplation.[5]

In contrast to Kant's aesthetic ideal, the masturbating reader — the reader of pornography, regardless of whether it's a book, picture, or film — is anything but disinterested. On the contrary, this reader does not have as a goal establishing the text's meaning through disinterested contemplation, but rather reducing the text's signifiatory potential to the pleasure of his or her own body. While critics and scholars may perform a hermeneutical interpretation of a sequence of pornographic images, they use a mode of reading intrinsically at odds with the aim of the masturbating person. That is, as soon as critics start to contemplate a given image's potential meaning, they also start to translate their physical reactions into an intellectual process, putting their mind in the way of the body, as it were. Masturbation blocks that kind of translation of the physical into the mental, or even reverses it. Although people can find mental activity during masturbation quite intense, it also almost invariably

involves performing certain movements with one's hands; such a process combining fantasy with physical activity is suggestive of how masturbation channels sexual imagery into one's body. Far from producing meaning, using pornography entails a mode of reading in which meaning is *consumed*. Masturbation can thus be said to be tantamount to a destruction of meaning, a veritable hermeneutical potlatch in which meaning is excessively consumed for the sole sake of consumption.[6]

If seen from the perspective of the masturbatory response it is designed to elicit, pornography thus seems much less a peripheral aspect of modernity than the allegorical seal of consumer culture as a whole. From such a perspective, pornography's masturbatory pleasures do not seem that dissimilar from, say, shopping's pleasures, which largely consist of rummaging through department stores and shopping malls while moving from one potential object of desire to the other. In order to understand pornography's *cultural* dimension, we thus first need to consider the way the consumptive mode of reading which pornography generates transforms this dimension into a symbolic register in which it can be freely consumed. The phenomenon's generality will emerge only if we allow for the singularity of the consumer's experience of the pornographic discourse.[6a]

Or so I will suggest. As I have indicated above, recent studies in pornography tend to proceed from the opposite assumption, namely that scholars can best understand pornography's general significance by downplaying rather than emphasizing the singularity of the pornographic experience. To demonstrate that this is the case, I would point to one major text: *Porn Studies*, a recent contribution to the field edited by Linda Williams. Apparently gathered to confirm the notion that pornography is a cultural phenomenon of general interest, individual contributions in the book convincingly demonstrate how much intellectual energy can be drawn from confronting rather than circumventing pornography, by "talking sex" as Williams puts it in her introduction.[7]

At the same time, however, the volume as a whole makes evident that no matter how eloquently one insists that pornography carries cultural implications of a general nature, the commendable effort to turn pornography into a cultural discourse of general significance founders in part upon an under-theorization of the investigation's very point of departure. By insisting that pornography is a genre amongst others, critics have inadvertently cemented the notion that pornography essentially refers to a particular kind of content, which can be read and interpreted like the content of other genres. In opposition to this view, I hold that the essential characteristic of pornography is not some trait of the discourse itself but, as I have suggested above, the way it is habitually read. This is not to deny that the battle over identity politics and intersectional issues should involve pornography, too. Rather I would suggest that critics who have tried to view pornography in an

historical context often counteract a genuine historicization of that phenomenon, as some of the articles in *Porn Studies* make plain. I conclude by suggesting why theorizing masturbation as a mode of reading is an essential first step towards historicizing pornography.

## Porn goes to academia

No one book has been more important for altering the perception of pornography in academia than Linda Williams's study of the pornographic movie and its history, *Hard Core*.<sup>[8]</sup> It appeared at a time when the theoretical discourse about pornography was characterized by impassioned rhetoric rather than well-founded reflections, and it constituted an important first step toward a less judgmental attitude to porn. At the time the book came out, the contemporary debate was concerned with the question of whether or not pornography more or less automatically translated into violation of women. In the face of such assertions, Williams quietly pointed out that the pornographic film can be seen as a genre just like the action movie or the musical, a genre that comes with a history to be studied. The pornographic movie thus can be interpreted and discussed much as any other cultural discourse.

With this book the academic study of pornography was, if not born, then at least established as a field of investigation in its own right. There had been important books prior to Williams's study, of course, but they were all rather defensive about the nature of their interest in the subject, tacitly accepting the academic preconception of pornography as a somewhat peripheral phenomenon, of merely tangential interest to the study of art, literature, and society.<sup>[9]</sup> Williams's book much more successfully positions pornography as one cultural discourse amongst others.

In *Hard Core* Williams describes cinematic pornography as the joint product of technological innovations and historical contingencies. While the anti-pornography camp of critics like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon may have a point in stressing that pornography in general tends to express a view of women which is both stereotypical and misogynistic, this adverse social effect does not derive from the nature of porn, Williams insists, but from its historical context. Like other cultural discourses, to a considerable extent pornography reflects its time. Furthermore, like other genres the pornographic movie has a history. And if we consider the films produced for and screened in cinemas during the 1970s in the light of that history, pornography might seem less and not more misogynistic the closer we come to our own present. From this perspective Williams largely defends pornography, arguing not to dismiss films like *Deep Throat* and *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* as misogynistic. In her reading, even though these films proceed from gender stereotypes, they also clearly revolve around the problem of female pleasure, and hence contain a utopian dimension almost in spite of themselves. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's suggestion that a narrative genre may contain an attempt to



provide an imaginary resolution to a real social conflict, Williams approaches hardcore as a genre enacting “the solution to the problem of sex through the performance of sex” (147).[10]

While hailed as a pioneering work, Williams’s book has also received important critiques. As Peter Lehman points out in a well-informed article, Williams overemphasizes the importance of narrative in the pornographic film and hereby tacitly elides other important aspects of it.[11] Profiting from the critique, Williams has subsequently revised her original position in a number of articles.[12] She has revised her original argument that pornography is likely to develop into a genre among other genres within mainstream cinema. Rather than being the “classical” era of cinematic pornography, that period between 1972 and 1985 in which pornography was made for full-blown cinematic screening, perhaps better serves as

“a short blip in an otherwise fairly consistent history of more ‘interactive’ engagements between bodies of spectators and machineries or networks of vision — whether the whirring projectors of the stag party, the remote controls of the VCRs, or the ‘mouse’ of interactive games.”[13]

These modifications notwithstanding, her general point of departure remains intact: pornography is a genre like other genres, and can be read and interpreted as such.

This is also very much the central notion of *Porn Studies*, a hefty volume of some 500 pages which amply demonstrates Williams’s importance to the research in the field. Constance Penley points out in her contribution to the volume,

“If Linda Williams’ breakthrough was to get us to think of pornographic film as *film*, that is, as a genre that can be compared to other popular genres like the western, the science fiction film, the gangster film, or the musical (porn’s closest kin, she says) and studied with the same analytical tools we take to the study of other films, the next logical step, it seems, would be to consider pornographic film as popular culture” (315).[14]

The essays in the book seem intent upon living up to this proposition. The opening section presents contemporary pornography of different kinds, from the Starr Report on President Clinton to porn on the web; the second applies a queer perspective from a gay and lesbian point of view; the third puts porn in relation to race and class; the fourth — and most sprawling — brings together three rather disparate essays under the heading “Soft Core, Hard Core, and the Pornographic Sublime”; and the last section, finally, relates porn to the avant-garde through readings of Andy Warhol’s *Blow Job*, and Scott Stark’s *NOEMA*, a video collage which rhythmically repeats the fleeting moments of unsexiness which are to be found in well-nigh every pornographic film

— for instance when the actors change positions — accompanied by Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for strings.”

The essays illustrate the notion that pornography is a multifaceted phenomenon. More debatable is whether the questions raised and the themes discussed show in what way pornography constitutes an inherent part of a larger system of cultural discourse. Particularly problematic is the authors' apparent unwillingness to define the heart of the matter: What is pornography? Given that the answer may seem too obvious to require an explicit formulation — we all judge ourselves capable of recognizing pornography upon seeing it — it is perhaps not surprising that Williams chooses not to confront this question in her introduction.

In practice, however, it has proven surprisingly difficult to come up with a satisfactory definition of the concept of pornography.[15] Where are we to draw the line, for instance, between the pornographic and the erotic? Is there a way of telling sexually explicit art from pornography proper? And are we to date the birth of pornography from the nineteenth-century when the concept as used today came into practice; to the seventeenth-century, when the first books that would seem to meet our own criteria for hardcore porn were published; or to antiquity, from which the term derives?[16] Instead of addressing issues like these, Williams opts for a common sense conception of pornography: pornography is whatever we tend to refer to as pornographic in everyday life. She thus implicitly comes to accept not only the vulgar equation between pornography and explicit sex, but more problematically, the concomitant notion that pornography is a marginal rather than central aspect of our culture: a phenomenon that can be studied as a field of its own, without more than tangentially relating it to society in general.

Williams’s shadow for good and ill weighs heavily upon a number of the essays, as is but to be expected as many of them were originally written for courses Williams taught in 1998 and 2001. Maria St. John’s reading of Kenneth Starr’s official report on President Clinton’s sexual liaisons with Monica Lewinsky, for instance, is little but an extended version of Williams’s suggestion that this incident could be viewed as a symptom of pornography having gone from being obscene to being everywhere present, “on/scene” as Williams somewhat labouredly puts it in the second edition of *Hard Core*. [17] Similarly, Minette Hillyer’s reading of Pamela Anderson’s and Tommy Lee’s notorious home-taped “porn-flick” is in principle a sheer extension of Williams’s view that the very *raison d’être* of the pornographic film is its attempt to capture the incontestable “truth” of sexuality.[18]

The second section of the book seeks to question in different ways the widely held notion of pornography as a stereotypically gendered discourse. Film historian Tomas Waugh implicitly criticizes Williams’s thesis that the so called “stag” films — short, sexually explicit films the length of a reel, produced between 1915 and 1968, and shown to

private gatherings of men — attempt to show the truth of sexuality by displaying female anatomy and female sexual excitement in as great a detail as possible.[19] These films, Waugh claims, really tell us more about the homosocial relations which form the basis of the image of masculinity which pervades American society (and Western society in general). Waugh convincingly queers this material by relating it to the so called “physiques” which predate gay porn flicks. In the late 1940s, short films started to be made for a growing home-movie market. One category of films focused principally upon young, well-built, male athletes who performed sports, showed off their muscles, or even wrestled with some other similarly handsome young man in tights. On the face of it, these films would seem simply to be portraying the ideal male image of the times, but they rest somewhat too emphatically on the bodies represented.

“The opposition between stags and physiques is neat, set by the glue of transgression: on the one hand, illicit films about licit desire and, on the other, licit films about illicit desire” (138).

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Less convincing is Jake Gerli's essay about homosexual director Chuck Vincent, who made pornographic movies for a heterosexual audience. [20][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) As an example of how Vincent allegedly introduces queer elements into the heterosexual pornographic discourse, Gerli analyzes a scene from *In Love* (1983) in which a man and woman are having sex on a mink coat. According to Gerli, this scene

“is queer in the sense that it puts the conventional straight sex act into proximity with the erotic life of things, making those things part of the performance” (210).

Of course, things regularly carry sexual connotations not only within the pornographic discourses but in social discourse at large, yet the concept of fetishism is not so much as mentioned in the context.

But if some of the essays in *Porn Studies* fail to convince, the great majority vividly demonstrate that pornography is a much more complex phenomenon than generally granted. At the same time, they often show the difficulty of circumventing the ideological dilemma the study of pornography entails. Cultural studies in general faces the same dilemma. As a disciplinary approach, it proceeds from the notion that canonizing certain works and certain forms of cultural practice relies on evaluation. Since that evaluation does not reflect any qualities objectively present in the texts studied, cultural studies tends to dismiss the valorizing process as a purely ideological instrument. That is, from this perspective of ideological analysis, cultural phenomena have become valorized less as a way of saying something significant about the texts studied than as a strategy for excluding certain phenomena and certain experiences that certain sectors of society do not wish to engage.

This critique of the standards behind the cultural canon has undoubtedly opened up new areas to cultural study. In practice, however, it has proved difficult to motivate the study of mass cultural phenomena without more or less explicitly declaring that they are worthy of being studied because they harbor precisely those positive qualities which are dismissed as ideological when advanced as evidence of the superiority of canonized culture. *Complexity* is one such common evaluative word — but within the field of porn studies, the most frequent contention is probably that pornography is somehow *subversive* in relation to the rest of culture. While Williams does not hesitate to point out that pornography often trades in a stereotypical and sometimes downright misogynistic image of

femininity, she nevertheless tends to ascribe a radical potential to pornography, treasuring it, much as Laura Kipnis does, as a discourse which is at least potentially an agent of social change.[21] In an essay about the ways in which some pornographic films exploit a desire to transcend racial taboos still very much in evidence in the United States, Williams demonstrates that such exploitation comes with a positive side-effect of making the desire visible, which in the long run might lead to the break-up of the taboo.

## Subversiveness of porn

Williams is far from alone in advocating the subversivity of pornography. In *Porn Studies*, Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, for instance, make a case for the specificity of gay male porn by maintaining that it has political implications lacking in heterosexual porn.[22] In this they are partly right, but only partly.

According to Cante and Restivo, gay male porn is different from its heterosexual equivalent in that it contains a utopian dimension lacking in the latter. Gay male porn not only displays a utopian fantasy about a world in which male homosexual desire is given free reign, but these fantasies come to influence actual society — so that real physical places can be transformed into meeting places for homosexual relations:

“In its continual reinscription of all the spaces surrounding us, all-male pornography at some point also become the field for the (utopian) reinvention of the world eternally promised by identity politics” (143).

It is not apparent how this differs from heterosexual porn. In fact, Williams argues that heterosexual pornography is likewise subversive in that it flaunts taboos, and that this phantasmatic transgression eventually also will likely spill over into historical reality.

Incidentally, it is worth noting how closely this figure of thought resembles that of anti-porn activists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, whose sharp rejection of pornography is based on the very same notion, namely that pornography will somehow automatically transform itself into reality.[23] In contrast to Dworkin and MacKinnon, it is true, Williams and the other contributors to *Porn Studies* stress that this transformation of fantasy into reality takes place gradually over time. Furthermore, they make clear that pornography is only one of a whole set of discourses which jointly have the effect of making us reconsider our view of reality. But in principle this argument that pornography has a positive effect upon society is not markedly different from the anti-porn argument that it has negative effects. And such a parallel suggests that from a theoretical point of view Williams's practice is not so far from that of the anti-porn camp as one might imagine.

Pornography's alleged subversivity is even more explicitly thematized

by Constance Penley, who argues that pornography expresses a “white trash” mentality, which manifests itself as a conscious distancing from whatever is deemed politically correct.[24] Pornography, Penley claims, strikes from a cultural position which is not even recognized as cultural — hence the very crude and very bad jokes which pervade so much of the genre. Since the jokes much more often are made at the expense of men than at women, they cannot be dismissed as misogynistic.

“What’s in the hearts of men according to porn? A utopian desire for a world where women are not socially required to say and believe that they do not like sex as much as men do. A utopian desire whose necessary critical edge, sharpened by trash tastes and ideas, is more often than not turned against the man rather than the woman” (325).

Implicitly, then, Penley suggests that we should see porn as expressing a utopian dream of a society in which women have the same right to acknowledge their sexual desires as do men. That seems an overly tendentious way of looking at the matter. Pornographic discourses portray women who celebrate sexuality, for sure, but it does not take much to see that it is not so much their own sexuality these women celebrate so much as the male viewer’s. Pornography as a rule depicts female desire as universal, intended for whatever and whomever, as if women were incapable of focusing their desire upon any specific object, barring of course, the phallus, which is itself merely another universal.

Like many other commentators, Penley would seem to overlook that much like any other discourse, non-normative pornography is subversive by definition to the extent that it challenges an established ideological order. Hence homosexual porn, gay as well as lesbian, may seem subversive today, just as pornography generally can be said to have fulfilled a subversive function during the first 150 or so years of its existence, starting from its earliest manifestations in mid-seventeenth century. It becomes political already by turning the established order upside down. But one should be careful to note that this political effect derives from the historical context, not from some political radicality inherent within pornography as such. Pornography’s subversivity is almost completely formulaic. Time and time again it repeats its simplistic strategy of unveiling the existence of a hidden pornographic wantonness behind a mask of respectability and morality: the greatest moralist inevitably harbors the greatest libertine. In a repressive climate, such a strategy cannot fail to be subversive, but it lacks the mark of a genuinely critical approach: the willingness to acknowledge the reality of cultural differences. At closer inspection, the pornographic version of ideological subversivity testifies solely to the pornographic imagination’s megalomaniac point of departure: Only *I* am real, and since the rest of the world exists only to feed my personal pleasure, it cannot be radically different from myself. When eighteenth century pornography exposes, say, the Catholic priest



as a libertine, the exposure is thus founded on the same *denial of difference* that in contemporary hardcore film dictates that women must crave the spectacle of the cum-shot as much as men.

Pornography's subversivity, then, derives not from its discourse but from the historical situation embedding it. Early pornography, as Lynn Hunt and others have shown, was not the purely instrumental genre it has become today, but it was

“almost always an adjunct to something else until the middle or end of the eighteenth century. In early modern Europe, that is, between 1500 and 1800, pornography was most often a vehicle for using the shock of sex to criticize religious and political authorities.”[25]

At first sight it may seem somewhat paradoxical that pornography seemingly lost its anti-authoritarian stamp at the very moment when the critique it expressed turned into concrete action in the form of the French Revolution.[26] It is, however, far from evident that it was the specifically pornographic elements that made eighteenth century erotic literature subversive. As book historian Robert Darnton has pointed out, the radical effect of the books censored by *l'ancien regime* did not principally derive from their content, but from the very fact that the regime attempted to prune the freedom of the printed word. So-called “philosophical books,” *livres philosophiques* — a category which included works by philosophers like Voltaire, Diderot, and d'Holbach, as well as pornographic books like *Monsieur Nicolas*, *Thérèse philosophe*, and *L'École des filles* — had been singled out as unfit by the monarchy, and this fact alone was sufficient to implement their radicalism:

"Everyone read the same books, including the same *livres philosophiques*. The authors of those books had pried literature loose from its attachment to the state. They had separated culture from power, or rather, they had directed a new cultural power against the orthodoxies of the old. So a contradiction opened up, separating an orthodox value system grounded in the absolutist state from a contestatory ethos rooted in literature. This contradiction defined the situation of the reader, whatever his or her social status. It demonstrated to everyone that times were out of joint, that cultural life no longer synchronized with political power. The Louis Quatorzean synthesis had come apart; and literature, which had done so much to legitimize absolutism in the seventeenth century, now became the principal agent of its delegitimation.”[27]

Under such circumstances pornography was subversive just by being read, as it belonged to an alternative mode of discursivity outlawed by the monarchy. The kind of subversivity that we can perhaps attribute to homosexual pornography today presents a similar case. Its subversivity will dissolve as soon as homosexuality ceases to appear

aberrant in itself, just as heterosexual pornography lost its political (if not its moral) radicality when the French Revolution supplanted an aristocratic ideology with that of the bourgeoisie.

## Historicizing porn

The decidedly utopian tone that often characterizes essays by porn's defenders thus may derive from their insufficient historicization of the phenomenon. Heather Butler, to name but one example in *Porn Studies*, tellingly concludes her exposé of lesbian pornographic film with a call for a more genuine mode of pornography:

“How much longer should we continue to fake it? How much longer will we watch as other females fake it? When will the very idea of faking it cease to be acceptable to women?” (192).[28]

Instead of pornography's simulation, Butler longs for a sexuality that rejects the very notion that sexual desire could be counterfeited. In other words, pornography must become true. Regardless of whether we sympathize with that wish or find it ill-founded, we cannot fail to notice that Butler's position marks a remarkable displacement of the anti-pornographic view of critics like Dworkin and MacKinnon. They condemned pornography because they held it to be true; Butler is critical of it on the grounds that it is not true enough.

It would appear, then, that the recent academization of pornography into porn studies, through its very insistence that pornography is a cultural discourse among others, risks making us blind to porn's wider cultural significance. Taking the link between pornography and the discursive treatment of sex for granted, critics to this day remain committed to the notion that pornography is above all a specific kind of content. However, it would be much more productive to see it as a certain kind of form structuring the relation between reader and discourse. Indeed, the state of pornography studies today could well be compared to that of literary studies in the early twentieth century — when the discipline was still dominated by different forms of source-centered perspectives, most of which looked to literature primarily as a container of sorts filled with a biographical or thematical content, which the critic needed to account for. The result was a literary criticism that explained what literature meant, but could not account for the specificity of literature's way of meaning.

In reaction to this form of criticism, blind to the individuality of literature, the Russian Formalists insisted upon the importance of focusing the *literarity* of literature, and in the process effectively put the notion of literature as a container of some thematical content on its head. For these critics, the content of a given work was not to be seen as the ultimate cause of the literary work, but merely as a motivation of the literary device. That is, a writer did not decide on the form of his or her story in order to express a given content, but made use of whatever

content lent itself to literary treatment. This is what allowed Viktor Shklovsky, one of the leading Formalists, to argue that Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, far from being an exceptional novel, is in fact the most typical novel of all, as it shows what is true of all literature, namely that it is a game played primarily for its own sake.[29]

As regards pornography, it is no exaggeration to say that the general critical perspective is still of a pre-Formalist order. Slanderers and defenders of the genre alike look to pornography primarily as the carrier of a specific content: sexually explicit words or images, which are seen as tantamount either to misogyny or pleasure, depending upon the point of view of the individual critic. As a result of this fixation with the contents of pornography, the fundamental question is persistently evaded: Wherein lies the specificity of pornography? What makes pornography's depiction of sexuality into something different from, say, that of medical, literary, or commercial discourse? Wherein lies, in short, the *pornographicity* of porn?

Here there is much to gain by following the steps of the theoretical development that literary studies has undergone during the last century. While the Formalist perspective is important, we need to remember that it quickly proved difficult to specify how to define *literarity* as such. The Formalists tried to advance different definitions; seeing literature as a kind of estrangement of ordinary language was perhaps their most productive notion. But literary criticism still did not have a real breakthrough until critics in the poststructuralist phase (to which we arguably still belong) pointed out that the category of the literary cannot be restricted to works we have traditionally consigned to that order. Rather, texts of a seemingly very different kind — works of philosophy, scientific reports, juridical texts, news reports, etc. — may also be read *as if* they were literature. Literarity in other words is not restricted to literature as such but is a property which we can observe in well nigh any discourse. Literarity, then, is not primarily a product of properties objectively present in the text, but rather a consequence of *a certain mode of reading*.

This brings me to the principal methodological thesis of this article. Just as literature's content can productively be seen as a strategic pretext for devoting oneself to literarity, sex in pornography is best seen as pretext for producing pornographicity. Such a point of departure immediately suggests a decisive consequence. Just as the literarity that is most prominent in literature cannot be confined to literature as such, the pornographicity of porn cannot be confined to pornography alone. In neither case — literarity and pornographicity respectively — is the phenomena in question a property of the discourse as such, but an effect of the way the discourse in question is *read*.

A theory of pornography must thus be a theory of the mode of reading which the consumption of pornography habitually involves, which is to say that it needs to be a theory of masturbation. Such a theory could do



worse than start from Rousseau's confession of his early penchant for "ces livres qu'on ne lit que d'une main" — the books that can be read with only one hand.[30] While jocular, Rousseau's circumlocution brings out an aspect of pornography that is easily overlooked but that applies to the genre as a whole, regardless of medium — book, photography, or video. To enjoy pornography, mere intellectual processing of the discourse is not enough: it calls for a mode of reading which involves the physical activity of one's body as well. In that sense, pornography is quite literally an interactive discourse. This discourse, much like the virtual reality of computer games, requires that the reader/consumer abolish the cognitive distance between the discursive and the historical present. The reader starts to act as if the two orders' separate temporalities were one.

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### Pornography remediated

Happily, the two most interesting essays in *Porn Studies* put the question of the epistemological status of porn behind them by explicitly focusing upon the relation between the pornographic text and its consumer. Somewhat symptomatically, perhaps, both take as their point of departure an examination of pornography in relation to new media, more precisely the VCR and the Internet. In these cases, our familiarity with the media has not yet petrified into any clear cut notions about how they provide access to the discourse, and hence we are forced to pay greater attention to what we actually do when we read. In “Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure, and the Return of the Sublime,” Franklin Melendez sets pornography in relation to postmodern theory in an effort to take into account not only the pornographic discourse as such, but also the interaction between the viewer and this discourse.<sup>[31]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) With Baudrillard and Jameson, Melendez argues that the experience of video and television is not structured primarily in accordance with a narrative logic, but that in narrative terms these media take on the aspect of an ever repeated Present that seeks to win our attention by stressing its own intensity. Thus these media seek to construct

“a particular type of viewing subject, one who becomes an extension of the material basis of the medium, a receptor interpolated via his or her own pleasure into the flattened temporality of video” (410).

Rather than a visual experience, Melendez argues with Baudrillard (who in turn developed an idea suggested by Marshall McLuhan) that television viewing is better characterized as a tactile experience, since television's primary aim is not to transmit a message to a receiver, but rather to perform a kind of cognitive massage which replaces intellectual content with sensual abandon: we *relax* watching television.

The argument has a good deal going for it, but it also shows traces of the technological determinism we have already seen in Williams. Like her, Melendez seems to assume that it is the emergence of new media as such which determines the way we relate to pornography. There is of course every reason to highlight the extent to which new media such as film, video, or the Internet, contribute to shaping our consumption of pornography; but one must be careful not to slip into arguing that these media are the cause of the particular form which pornographic

consumption tends to take. After all, as we have noted above, the interactive aspect of pornography is arguably implied already in Rousseau's playful definition of the genre. Rather than transforming pornography, TV and video must be said to intensify traits which are characteristic of pornography even in its literary form.

Equally productively, Zabet Patterson focuses on pornography on the Internet, and begins by pointing out that

"the encounter with pornography, and the encounter with technology, may not allow for an easy, distanced critical spectatorship" (105).[32]

Like many others, Patterson too makes a point of arguing that the medium as such provides an important key to the nature of the pornographic discourse:

"the physical apparatus of the computer, and the material habits it requires, places the viewer in a relationship with the images in Internet pornography that differs significantly from the viewer's relationship to other types of pornography" (108).

Consuming pornographic images on the Internet inevitably involves a great deal of waiting for the images to download. This waiting may seem tedious, but as Patterson helpfully argues, it should be looked upon rather as an essential aspect of the *pleasure* of consuming porn on the Internet. By constantly offering an abundance of links that lead on toward new images, cyberporn exploits the anticipatory pleasure which derives from the fact that the viewer's access to the images is constantly delayed. Thus it is possible, to

"see the satisfaction as taking place in the deferral of satisfaction itself. Seen in this light, the goal exists in part to allow the subject, or a portion of the subject, to rationalize the pleasure of surfing. To imagine the goal, then, is to project into a moment of perfect satisfaction — and the obtaining of a perfect image, one completely adequate to the subject's desire. But in comparison to this imagined perfect image, every image will always remain inadequate, and so the 'search' continues. [...] The subject is faced with a choice — will this be the last image? Even if the viewer knows he or she is unlikely to find one better, he will often continue on, foregoing the pleasures of the known for the pleasures (often through frustration) of the unknown. The user constantly shifts on to new images — and in this process, new delays — in an endless slippage of desire in which part of the pleasure derives from habitual repetition and habitual deferral." (109-110)

In an analysis of a pay-site where the members get the opportunity to watch the models doing non-sexual things in different everyday



situations, Patterson goes on to show how pornography exploits the reader's or viewer's sense of lack by portraying it as its own, that is by pretending that the viewer's lack — or, to spell it out, his sexual desire — is needed in order to consummate the discourse:

“in Web-based, amateur pornography, viewers are witnessing the abolition of the spectacular itself through a collapse of subject and object and of the poles of activity and passivity. It is no longer a question of watching but of a hallucinatory ‘being there’ while knowing that one is not ‘there’ and that, in fact, there is no ‘there’ there (i.e. no reality apart from its mediation)” (114).

This acute observation indicates that there is a deep inner resemblance between pornography and the increasingly simulated status of social space, which many critics hold to be one of the most characteristic traits of postmodern society. Even so, Patterson's conclusion is far from self-evident:

“Pornography changes once it is positioned on the computer; the attraction of cyberporn becomes in part the attraction and fascination with what we perceive as the vastly new possibilities for subjectivity that technology seems to offer” (120).

Does pornography really change when it is mediated by new media? Is it not rather the case that such remediations bring us closer to an understanding of what has since its inception constituted the pull of pornography: its ability to engage us not through the temporal structure of a narrative, but through the immediate presence of narrating?[33]

In her attempt to highlight the interaction between the pornographic discourse and its consumer, Patterson undoubtedly takes an important step in the right direction, but by suggesting that the medium as such *causes* the effects she identifies, she nevertheless ends up repeating the mistake of Williams's first book. By failing to consider other forms of pornography than the cinematic, Williams implicitly ratifies the widely held view that the effect of the pornography is media specific, that is, that its significance varies from medium to medium. She thus comes to neglect the fact that the most important factor is not the medium as such, but rather the way we relate to it: it is not the *medium* that accounts for the specificity of pornography, but the way pornography is *read*. The fact that the original *Josephine Mutzenbacher* — commonly attributed to Felix Salten, the author of *Bambi* — is a book while *Debbie Does Dallas* is a film certainly affects the way we relate to these pornographic discourses. But the difference is insignificant compared to the fact that the typical consumer of these discourses is too busy masturbating to ask what they mean as narratives. To understand how pornography works, in short, one has to take into account the masturbatory mode of response it habitually triggers, which could arguably be classified as an alternative, anti-hermeneutical mode of

reading.

## Masturbation as a mode of reading

Masturbation, as we noted earlier, is not a purely physical reading — to masturbate is not exclusively, or even primarily, to touch your own body. For this kind of self-stimulation to become pleasurable, we need to work ourselves up into a state of excitement. This is usually done by making a psychological or physical entity the object of our actions: while stimulating our sexual organs or some other erogenous zone of our body, we play at doing something to someone else. Like a traditional hermeneutic mode of reading, then, masturbation is primarily a psychological phenomenon. Masturbation distinguishes itself from a hermeneutical mode of reading, however, by translating the psychological process involved into a set of physical actions. The translation need not be immediate.

Masturbation often comprises a preparatory phase, which may involve daydreaming but also selecting and arranging the materials to be used: flipping through porno-mags or searching the Internet for the most exciting images, potentially, as Patterson suggests, for hours on end. [34] While this often entails deferring the moment of orgasm, such a mode of reading provides a sense of pleasure by allowing the reader an immediate sense of fulfillment. Whereas the process of reading normally involves translating the psychological registration of a sign or object into another psycholinguistic sign by taking it to signify this or that, in masturbation the psycholinguistic register which forms the basis of our actions is always ultimately transformed into physical pleasure. Instead of producing the significance of the discourse in the manner of a person standing in a hermeneutical relation to a discourse, the reader who engages in such a masturbatory mode of reading *consumes* the signifying potential of the discourse.

From a rhetorical perspective, one could thus say that the act of masturbation which accompanies the consumption of pornography provides ample evidence of how successfully porn effects the ultimate goal of every rhetorical exposition: to be persuasive enough to immediately call forth from its audience a certain mode of action. Pornography's persuasive element is thus highly conspicuous — photographic pornography, indeed, comes with an inherent graphicality so forceful it would seem well-nigh impossible to doubt the truth of what it depicts. [35] The ideological nature of this truth, it is important to observe, does not derive from some hidden meaning located in the pornographic discourse. Instead, it is a product of porn's ability to persuade us that it can annul its own fictivity: that it can become a reality which is literally lived *through* by the reader, in that s/he consumes the reality made available by the discourse the very moment s/he experiences it. Pornography automates the persuasivity of rhetoric. To read pornography the way it asks to be read is to convince oneself of the reality of the discourse; it is to give in to its incontestable sense of presence, if but for the moment in which we

experience it.

From such a perspective, Williams's claim in the introduction to *Porn Studies* that pornography testifies to "the modern compulsion to speak incessantly about sex" (2) is a reductive simplification, which might well make us blind to the most important facet of the phenomenon. For pornography does not only talk about sex, it is a form of sex: masturbation. Williams's perspective, be it noted, has the strategic advantage of making the study of pornography academically decent. For if it is really the case that pornography can be said to establish a mode of knowledge — as Williams, inspired by Foucault, claims in her first book — it also means that it can be seen as yet another text to be interpreted and hence easily incorporated by academic discourse. While the strategic advantages of looking at pornography as a genre amongst others are considerable, there are also considerable theoretical drawbacks with thus normalizing the pornographic discourse.

Indeed, Williams's *Hard Core* in itself provides an instructive example of a way of approaching cultural discourses that I am wary of. In accordance with postmodern propriety, Williams carefully places "truth" between inverted commas. She thus signals that she is fully aware that truth is always a constructed truth, that is, a mediated image of the real rather than the real as such. She accordingly stresses that pornography consistently fails in its attempt to depict the incontestable "truth" of sexual pleasure, that — in truth — cinematographic pornography "is no less rhetorical in operation" than the literary pornography which precedes it.[36] Williams thus wants to argue that pornography claims to unveil the truth of sexual pleasure, a claim which she in turn claims to expose by unveiling the constructed nature of pornographic "truth."

She fails to develop a much more interesting possibility, namely that the pornographic discourse makes no secret of the constructed nature of its "truth," and that its consumers are likewise quite clear on its essentially rhetorical nature, *but that this does not detract from its persuasive efficiency*. She thus misses out on the opportunity to recognize in pornography a form of discursivity which through its very intentionality predates the cognitive structures which pervade contemporary society. For rather than marked by a will to represent an incontestable truth, pornography is a form of discursivity which from the very outset has abandoned the claim to represent reality. It seeks instead to establish a truth which is applicable only within the parameters of its own discourse. If this is seen, it immediately becomes apparent how deep are the parallels between the desire founded by the pornographic discourse, and the desire founded by consumer society.

## Pornographicity of consumer society

Modern consumption, as sociologist Colin Campbell points out, is characterized by its endless nature. The consumption of one

commodity does not lead to fulfilment, but marks rather the well-nigh immediate birth of a desire for yet another commodity.[37]  
Consumerism thus breeds a desire which is in many ways remarkably similar to that fostered by pornography. Left wing intellectuals have in general tended to denounce this craving for commodities as an instance of false consciousness. John Berger, for instance, argues that advertising in effect serves to deflect people's attention from the political realm of the here and now, to a fantasized realm of a utopian future, which, while endlessly deferred, abolishes the possibility of acting to change society:

“Publicity, situated in a future continually deferred, excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All that happens, happens outside it.”[38]

While I would agree with Berger that what he calls “publicity” (advertising) tends to steer our attention away from political space, I would argue that advertising does this not by postponing the moment in which desire is fulfilled, but on the contrary by making this moment constantly available to us. Like pornographic discourses, advertising promises not only that desire can always be fulfilled, but that I personally can fulfill it, regardless of the will of other people. We delude ourselves if we dismiss advertising's contentions as a lie, for advertising like pornography is fully capable of making good on this promise. All it asks in return is that we agree to suspend our relation to the rest of the world — or more specifically, that we suspend our relation to the Real dimension of society, for the benefit of enjoying Imaginary pleasures. The lie promulgated by, say, an ad for a particular brand of sneakers is not that purchasing them will make us happier, for the brand may have sufficient symbolic force to make us elated with such a purchase. The lie is that those sneakers' reality is to be sought solely in the product itself, when in truth it also involves the working conditions of the factory workers who produced them — just as the lie of pornography is not that it brings satisfaction, but that it pretends to provide it at no cost for anyone else but ourselves.

My point, which for reasons of space can here only be sketched, is the following: the desire forged by commercial media discourses could well be of the same order as that generated by the pornographic discourses. Like pornography, this media discourse often sets out to represent actual events, claiming rather unsubtly to be real, to depict actuality. At a closer look, however, this claim to reality turns out as dubious as that of porn. The actors in porn flicks certainly do have sex, but rarely or never in a way that people outside porn have sex. Similarly, the articles that fill the tabloids may be about things that have really happened, but many of these reports or presentations do not deal with real social events, but with pseudo-incidents directly tied to stagings of a simulated reality: reality shows, news reports, talk shows, etcetera. In that sense, the commercial media discourse itself could be characterized as pornographic. Just as in pornography as such, the



truth figuring in, say, the tabloids often does not strive to say something about reality but to implement our desire for a discursive reality that substitutes for the real thing. This is of course not a new insight — the notion that we live in a hyperreality wherein simulation encapsulates everything has been propagated by Jean Baudrillard since the mid 1970s, and today it is so widely diffused that it sometimes seems an empty phrase of postmodern theory.[39] To stop at pointing out the constructed nature of social space would thus be tantamount to committing the same fault I find in Williams' work: to present the unveiling of the constructed nature of reality as a truth in its own right, whereas this circumstance really abolishes the possibility of understanding the world in terms of true and false.

My present critique is thus not directed so much at the media discourse itself as at the critical academic discourse which despite nominally declaring that it is quite aware that reality is never available to us apart from the way it is discursively mediated, in practice proceeds as if there were a truth behind the discourse to reveal. The realization that there are at least two fundamentally different modes of reading may usefully correct this misunderstanding. For while the ideological nature of a stereotyping discourse like pornography may seem apparent from the point of view of a hermeneutic mode of reading, the matter will seem very different from the perspective of a masturbatory mode of reading. Where the interpreter can see nothing but ideology, ideology becomes all but invisible for the reader who instead of interpreting the discourse (or, as Barthes puts it, produces it), chooses to enjoy it, to consume its inherent signifying potential. I would not want to imply that there is an absolute difference between the two ways of relating to discourses here under discussion — they cannot, thus, be construed as an ascetical, academic way of reading, versus a hedonistic one; on the contrary, what is at stake are two diverging ways of relating to pleasure as such. The hermeneutic mode of reading makes it possible for us to take pleasure in unraveling the discourse, by tracing the way it is constituted, allowing us to understand its mechanics, that is, how it produces its effects. The masturbatory reading, in contrast, provides a pleasure which is dependent upon our failure to understand the discourse, since that allows us to return to it ever anew with the same sense of fascination.

It is thus a mistake, if a common one, to play the two modes of reading against one another, in order to suggest that the interpretive reading discloses the ideological foundations of the consuming mode of reading. We find such a contrastive reading not only within academia but even more frequently within media discourse itself — as the tabloid placards promising to reveal the truth behind the scenes of reality shows like *Big Brother* continuously remind us. That this gesture of "understanding ideology" is so common today in itself is a clear indication of how incomplete our present understanding of the masturbatory mode of reading remains. Instead of theorizing the specificity of the masturbatory mode of reading, the main trend in Cultural Studies in the wake of a pioneer like Roland Barthes (in whose

writings the tension between these two modes of reading is particularly intense) is rather to pretend that discourses which habitually generate a masturbatory mode of response can be made the object of a hermeneutical mode of reading, without detriment to the analysis.

Such, as we have seen, is very much the case with Williams's own work. The lasting achievement of her pioneering study may well be its acculturation of pornography, its way of making it acceptable as an academic subject, and thus available for the hermeneutical pleasure which was previously restricted to high cultural genres and artifacts. Insofar as she has accomplished this, her feat is parallel to that whereby advertising, newspapers, and a whole range of other cultural discourses were made available to academic study by Barthes and other semiotically inspired researchers during the 1960s and 70s. Naturally, this acculturation is of great importance in itself — yet to make mass culture academically decent is not tantamount to demystifying its ideology.[40] On the contrary, such a transposition of a mode of reading typical of mass cultural discourses into a mode of reading typical of academia fails to take into account the ideological implications which derive not from the discourse, but from the act of reading as such, regardless of whether that is primarily hermeneutical or primarily masturbatory. Making this distinction between two different modes of relating to society's discursivity does not solve the dilemma, yet it is likely an essential first step toward a genuinely dialectic suspension of the question of the relation between fiction and reality.

At any rate, it likely resolves the problem of how to analyze pornography's specificity without diminishing its cultural centrality. I have argued that the way pornography is habitually read is not a contingent element extrinsically levied upon the pornographic discourse, but rather a necessary prerequisite for experiencing the pornographic discourse *as pornographic*. Once this is understood, pornography need no longer be viewed as a peripheral phenomenon within society but can be seen rather as a central aspect of modernity, a phenomenon intimately related to the emergence of consumer society as such. From such a perspective, the emergence of pornography in the seventeenth century does not signify the birth of a new genre as much as the emergence of a new kind of cognitive space, one which allows the individual to be at least momentarily insulated from social relations, or, which amounts to the same thing, from history.

Pornography brings out into the open, even if cannot be said to create, a cognitive space marked by a supreme sense of presence, of transcendence *within* rather than beyond materiality, in which the individual will appear free from all external ideological determinants. Needless to say, this appearance is largely illusory; yet, as volumes such as *Porn Studies* make evident, it is not wholly so. There is a utopian dimension to pornography, but like that of other cultural discourses, its utopian dimension depends less on the shape of the discourse itself as upon the way we make use of it.

Pornography will likely long remain a contestatory ground for identity politics as well as a rich source for intersectional analysis. Whether it can fulfill its liberating potential depends largely upon whether we can resist the temptation to give in to its utopian promise of transcendence. For that promise is at one with the promise of consumer society as such. Rather than reifying pornography into a field of its own, therefore, in cultural studies we should devote our energies to studying the pornographicity of everyday life.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### Notes

[1] Stephen Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* 2nd ed. New York: New American Library 1974, 195-196. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

[2] Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* New York: Grove Press 1996, 62.

[3] Laurence O'Toole, *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire* London: Serpent's Tail 1999, 313.

[4] My point will be familiar to readers of Fredric Jameson; see "Metacommentary," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986. Volume 1 Situations of Theory* London: Routledge 1988, 3-16 and 190-91: "the absence of any need for interpretation is itself a fact that calls out for interpretation" (8).

[5] There is in this respect a surprising consonance between the attitude of Kant and someone like Barthes, who, for all his espousal of the erotic dimension of the text, remains at heart faithful to the tenet of the philosopher in stressing the importance of distance in order to enjoy the text erotically. Barthes's notion harks back to the Tel Quel group's view of the text, aptly summarized by Jameson "as a self-generating mechanism, as a perpetual process of textual production;" see Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* Princeton: Princeton UP 1972, 182.

[6a] While I am confident that empirical investigations would confirm much of my argument in this article, I must stress that I am not making an empirical argument, but a theoretical one. I am not primarily dealing with the responses to porn by empirical readers, which will inevitably be multifaceted and diverse; see for instance, Clarissa Smith, *One for the Girls: The Pleasures and Practices of Reading Women's Porn* (Intellect: Bristol, 2007). Rather, I am dealing with the reader insofar as s/he must be posited as *a function of the text*. This function is an important aspect of actual consumers' experience of porn, but it does not tell the whole story. My claim in this article is simply that unless we take this particular aspect of the reader's experience of porn into account, we are not really talking about pornography at all.



[6] The conception of the potlatch as excessive consumption derives from Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, edited and with an introduction by Allan Stoekl; translated by Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitts and Donald M. Leslie, Jr Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P 1985. I invoke it for its suggestiveness, fully aware that it has struck anthropologists as questionable.

[7] Linda Williams, "Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene: An Introduction", *Porn Studies*, 1-23, in Linda Williams (ed.), *Porn Studies* Durham: Duke UP 2004. All references in the text are to this volume.

[8] Linda Williams, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible* Berkeley: University of California Press 1989.

[9] Foremost amongst earlier studies of pornography is Marcus's close readings of Victorian pornography, *The Other Victorians*, originally published in 1966. Walter Kendrick's *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* New York: Viking 1987, which traces the origins of the concept of pornography to mid-nineteenth century, came out at roughly the same time as Williams's study.

[10] A given narrative genre, in Jameson's phrasing, is not so much "a mere reflex or reduplication of its situational context," but rather "the imaginary resolution of the objective contradictions to which it... constitutes an active response;" see *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* Ithaca: Cornell UP 1981, 118.

[11] Peter Lehman, "Revelations about Pornography", *Film Criticism* 20:1-2 (1995): 3-16.

[12] See in particular the epilogue to the expanded paperback edition of *Hard Core* Berkeley: University of California Press 1999, 280-316; but also "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess", *Film Quarterly*; 44:4 (1991): 2-13; "Pornographies On/scene, or 'Diffrent Strokes for Diffrent folks", in Lynne Segal, and Mary McIntosh (reds.), *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* London: Virago 1992; "Second Thoughts on *Hard Core*: American Obscenity Law and the Scapegoating of Deviance", in Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (reds.), *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* London: BFI Publishing 1993; "Sisters Under the Skin: Video and Blockbuster Erotic Thrillers", in Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (reds.); *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader* Philadelphia: Temple UP 1993, 105-14; and "Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the 'Carnal Density of Vision'", in Patrice Petro (ed.), *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video* Bloomington: Indiana UP 1995, 3-41.

[13] *Hard Core*, expanded edition, 300.

[14] Constance Penley, "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn", *Porn Studies*, 309-331.

[15] Even though at least six governmental commissions within the English speaking countries have been devoted to the question of the legal status of pornography, no satisfactory answer has emerged. The reports in question are known as The Lockhart Commission, or the Surgeon General's Workshop (US, 1970); the Williams Committee, or the British Inquiry into Obscenity and Film Censorship (UK, 1979); the Fraser Committee Report, or the Canadian Justice Department's Commission (Canada, 1984); the Meese Commission, or the Attorney General's Commission (US, 1986); and the Joint Select Committee on Video Material (Australia, 1988). For discussions of these, see Marcia Pally, *Sex and Sensibility: Reflections on Forbidden Mirrors and the Will to Censor* Hopewell: Ecco Press 1994, 57–61; Bernard Arcand, *The Jaguar and the Anteater: Pornography Degree Zero*, tr. Wayne Grady London: Verso 1993; Gordon Hawkins, and Franklin E. Zimring, *Pornography in a Free Society* Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1988.

[16] On the history of pornography, see David Foxon, *Libertine Literature in England 1660-1745* New York: University Books 1965; Ian Frederick Moulton, *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England* Oxford: Oxford UP 2000; and Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*.

[17] Maria St John, "How to Do Things with the Starr Report: Pornography, Performance, and the President's Penis", *Porn Studies*, 27–49.

[18] Minette Hillyer, "Sex in the Suburban: Porn, Home Movies, and the Live Action Performance of Love in Pam and Tommy Lee: Hardcore and Uncensored", *Porn Studies*, 50–76.

[19] Thomas Waugh, "Homosociality in the Classical American Stag Film: Off-Screen, On-Screen", *Porn Studies*, 127–141.

[20] Jake Gerli, "The Gay Sex Clerk: Chuck Vincent's Straight Pornography", *Porn Studies*, 198–220. [\[return to page 2\]](#)

[21] Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged*.

[22] Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, "The Cultural-Aesthetic Specificities of All-male Moving-Image Pornography", *Porn Studies*, 142–166.

[23] See for instance Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* London: Women's Press 1979; and Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words* Cambridge: Harvard UP 1993.

[24] Constance Penley, "Crackers and Whackers."

[25] Lynn Hunt, "Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800", in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*

New York: Zone Books 1993, 9–45, and 341–45, 10.

[26] Lynn Hunt, “Pornography and the French Revolution”, in Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography*, 301–339, and 394–400, 305. Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914* New Brunswick: Rutgers UP 2002, argues to the contrary, if unconvincingly to my view, that pornography did not lose its political edge in the nineteenth century.

[27] Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*. New York: Norton, 1995, 196–97.

[28] Heather Butler, “What Do You Call a Lesbian with Long Fingers? The Development of Lesbian and Dyke Pornography”, *Porn Studies*, 167–197.

[29] Viktor Shklovsky, “The Parody Novel: Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*,” tr. Richard Sheldon, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 1 (1981): 190–21; originally in *O Teorii Prozy* (Moscow, 1929).

[30] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, 1, “ces dangereux livres qu'une belle dame de par le monde trouve incommodes, en ce qu'on ne peut les lire que d'une main.”

[31] Franklin Melendez, “Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure, and the Return of the Sublime”, *Porn Studies*, 401–427. [\[return to page 2\]](#)

[32] Zabet Patterson, “Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era”, *Porn Studies*, 104–123.

[33] For an outline of this process, see Magnus Ullén, “Namnet för detta är ondska’: Konsumtionssamhället och det pornografiska berättandet” [“The Name for This is Evil’: Consumer Society and the Pornographic Mode of Narration”], *Böygen. Litteraert tidskrift* 17: 4 (2005): 20–35; available online at: <http://foreninger.uio.no/boygen/Namnetfordettaarondska.pdf>.

[34] For masturbation as a process, see Rüdiger Lautmann and Michael Schetsche, *Das pornographierte Begehren* Frankfurt am Main: Campus 1990.

[35] In actual fact the truth of pornography is rhetorical through and through, a circumstance I have highlighted elsewhere; see Magnus Ullén, “Andrea Dworkin och den pornografiska sanningen” [“Andrea Dworkin and the Truth of Pornography”], *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 3 (2005): 42–66; and “Dream-Come-Truth: Postmodern Narrativity and Hardcore Porn”, in *Literature and Visual Culture*, ed. Dagný Kristjánsdóttir Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press 2005, 394–408.

[36] Williams, *Hardcore*, 32.

[37] Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern*

*Consumerism* Oxford: Blackwell 1987.

[38] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* London: Penguin 1972, 153.

[39] See for instance *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, tr. Iain Hamilton London: Sage Publications 1993 (1976).

[40] That Barthes himself was aware of this is evident from his later writings; see for instance “Change the Object Itself: Mythology Today”, in *Image—Music—Text* tr. Stephen Heath New York: Hill and Wang 1977 (originally in *Esprit*, 1971), 165–169.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### Real sex: aesthetics and economics of art-house porn

by [Jon Lewis](#)

In 1964, a few months after the release of *Dr. Strangelove*, there was a party at Stanley Kubrick's house and somebody brought along a hard-core film. After watching a bit of the picture, Kubrick said to the screenwriter Terry Southern,

“Wouldn't it be interesting if one day someone who was an artist would do that — using really beautiful actors and good equipment.”[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

At the time, such a project was unthinkable.

In 1970, Southern recalled Kubrick's proposal when he wrote the satirical novel, *Blue Movie* about a bored, Academy Award winning film director named King B., who, with the help of Sid Krassman, a successful film producer, and Angela Sterling, a mainstream star bent on doing something serious, sets out to produce the most expensive and best X-rated movie of all time. That Hollywood might produce such a film was in 1970 easier to imagine. And but for a couple of lawyers mucking up the works, it might have happened.

John Calley, then president of Warner Brothers supervised the development of *Blue Movie* in 1974. As Southern tells it:

“He [Calley] was convinced that the first studio to come out with a quality full length film showing erection and penetration, using stars, would go over the top ... it'll be like *Gone with the Wind*.”[2]

Calley hired Mike Nichols, who had recently directed the R-rated melodrama *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), and cast Julie Andrews (then Calley's girlfriend), to play Angela Sterling. A fourteen-million-dollar budget, quite adequate for the time, had been secured, and everything was ready. Southern mused,

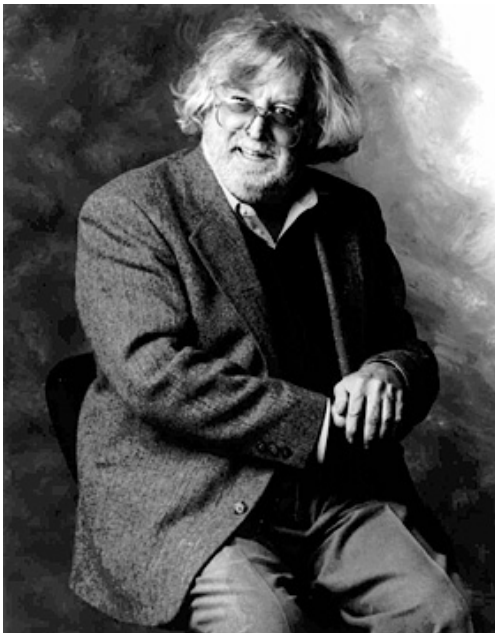
“John's diabolical genius envisioned Mary Poppins getting banged for the world.”[3]

The mind reels ... but key here is less the brilliant exploitation of an iconic actress than the impact the film might have had on the future of Hollywood. With Nichols and Andrews involved, *Blue Movie* would have been hard to dismiss as just porn.

Ringo Starr, who starred in the 1969 film adaptation of Southern's best known novel, *The Magic Christian* (Joseph McGrath), held the option on *Blue Movie*. He told Calley that he was ready to step aside now that there was an actual production ready to roll. Enter the villain of the piece: Ringo's



Stanley Kubrick.



Terry Southern.

lawyer, who demanded points for his client. Negotiations ensued, but Nichols' lawyers refused to concede, claiming that the director needed to control all the available points to make deals with actors. The lawyers never found common ground, and the film was never made. If we can believe Southern, this may be the closest a major studio ever came to making a feature with "real sex." And it all started with a porno screening at Stanley's house.

## Art-house porn

On September 19, 1999 Catherine Breillat's *Romance*, a French art film with "real sex" — that is: scenes of un-simulated sexual activity including penetration, a very long take on an erect penis, and a money shot — premiered in the United States, and a new genre was born: art-house porn. "Art-house" referred to these films' ultimate venue and "porn" regarded quite obviously to the graphic scenes of "real sex." As the term is used today, the phrase "art house" has taken on a second meaning; it is employed as a kind of qualifier, to refer to films that are not exactly or not quite or not really porn. The distinction is important with regard to distribution and exhibition and audiences as well as the producers and performers recognize the difference. When asked about art-house porn in a 2006 interview, the veteran hardcore producer-director-performer Joanna Angel put things in context:

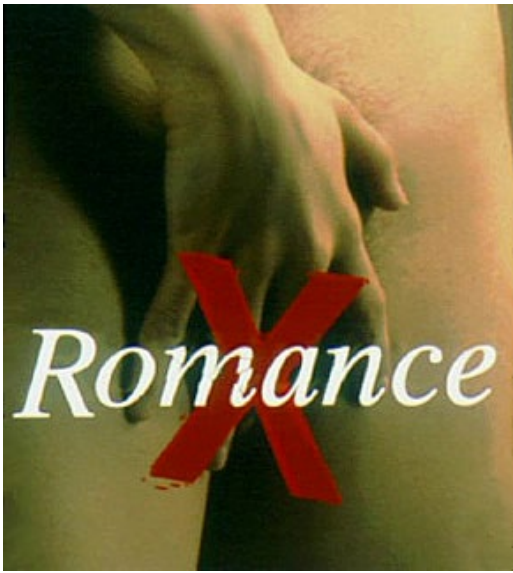
"I want to make something that's hot before I want to make something that's good. If people are saying these [art house] movies are porn they should sit down and watch a porn [movie] and find out." [4]

The distinction between art-house porn and even the steamiest of commercial features is also clear: art-house porn includes on-screen (in the absence of a better term) "real sex": visible (vaginal and/or oral) penetration. Studio films do not. The notion that "real sex" has occurred on mainstream movie sets has long been the stuff of gossip and conjecture. But even if we could believe the urban legends regarding real on-set sex in studio movies featuring famous movie stars (Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland in *Don't Look Now*, Jessica Lange and Jack Nicholson in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Debra Winger and John Malkovich in *The Sheltering Sky*), and I don't think we can (for practical reasons), what audiences got to see in the release cuts of these pictures was blocked and cut to accommodate the MPAA. No penetration, no erections, no money shot.

Like virtually all art-house porn, *Romance* was released without an MPAA rating because there was no way it could have received an MPAA seal (as an R-rated picture). The racy one-sheets and poster ads for the film featured a woman touching herself suggestively, a come-on that would not have passed muster with the MPAA either. [5]

*Romance*'s U.S. distributor, Trimark, had by 1999 an eclectic record, showcasing

- low-budget horror franchises like *Warlock* (Steve Miner, 1989) and *Leprechaun* (Mark Jones, 1993, with Jennifer Aniston in her big-screen debut),
- art-house U.S. independent titles like *Federal Hill* (Michael Corente, 1994) and *Eve's Bayou* (Kasi Lemons, 1997) and
- a variety of foreign-made negative pick-ups [6] like the erotic melodrama *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (Mira Nair, 1996), the political melodrama *Chinese Box* (Wayne Wang, 1997), and the historical drama *Last September* (Deborah Warner, 1999).



The racy one-sheet for Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999).

How these very different films fit together is easy enough to see once you look past what they're about and look instead at their place within the theatrical marketplace. All, including *Romance*, are niche productions, films targeted at (and only interesting to) a select clientele promising a predictable but relatively modest cost to profit margin. *Romance* performed slightly better than most European imports — about \$1.3 million in its nine week U.S. run. The modest gross was hardly enough to interest the major studios in accommodating films with such content and finally proved inadequate to keep Trimark afloat. Just months after the release of *Romance*, the indie studio folded, selling its assets to the slightly larger and more successful independent, Lions Gate. To date Lions Gate, a bigger company than Trimark with a bigger stake in the indie marketplace, has not distributed anything that might be categorized as art-house porn.

*Romance* proved to be part of a late 20th century/early 21st century trend of hard(er)-core foreign-made films:

- Francois Ozone's *Sitcom* (1998),
- Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998),
- Leo Carax's *Pola X* (1999),
- Jang sun Woo's *Lies* (1999),
- Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's *Baise Moi* (2000),
- Patrice Chereau's *Intimacy* (2001) and
- Julio Medem's *Lucia y el sexo* (2001).

Initially I was a bit skeptical about these films; I assumed that the inclusion of real sex was a sort of publicity stunt. There was after all a whole lot of press coverage for these films: *Romance*, *Baise Moi* and *Intimacy* in particular.

It is axiomatic that controversy sells in the film business, but not in this case. Consider the numbers:

- *The Idiots*, \$7,235;
- *Pola X* (despite a presence, sort of, in U.S. theaters from September 2000 through April 2001), \$172,107;
- *Lies*, \$61,900;
- *Baise Moi*, \$74,018; and
- *Intimacy*, \$103,440.

Only *Romance* and *Lucia y el sexo* (which was released theatrically with an R rating — the Unrated, real sex version was released later on DVD) broke the \$1 million mark, earning approximately the same amount (in the same venues) as the U.S.-made documentaries *American Movie* (Chris Smith, 1999) and *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg* (Aviva Kempner, 1998),

the U.S. indie features *Girlfight* (Karen Kusuma, 2000), and *Hamlet 2000* (Michael Almereyda, 2000), and the PG-rated Iranian import *The Color of Paradise* (Majid Majidi, 1999), hardly big earners even in the humble realm of the art house.

Through 2008, no real sex film has earned more than \$2 million at the box office in the United States, and regardless of publicity virtually all of these films have faced significant obstacles in what continues to be a home-box-office aftermarket governed by restrictive cable television standards and practices and by the caprice of ideologically conservative big box outlets. Premium cable channels like HBO won't show real-sex films uncut, and major DVD outlets like Blockbuster and Wal-Mart won't shelve NC-17, X and Unrated films.

These films are little seen but much talked about. Successfully positioning them in the marketplace has proven difficult for their U.S. distributors because the only way to promote these films is to highlight the taboo-breaking real sex interludes. But there is more to art-house porn than just a willingness to show and tell all. There is a seriousness of purpose and a kind of aesthetic purity to which these films aspire, a gesture towards a new cinematic realism made by filmmakers and actors who are willing to show and do anything and everything for their art. As will be evident in the discussion to follow, art-house porn is a genre defined by both a market niche *and* a set of shared aesthetic principles that introduce a peculiar but nonetheless sincere cinematic realism.

## Careful times at the MPAA

The first wave of real-sex films reached the marketplace in what were indisputably careful days at the studios and at the MPAA. The X, NC-17 and Unrated designations had come to signify not only a certain sort of content but a market niche and market share as well. Films with explicit material — the real sex imports as well as U.S. independents that are clearly aimed at adult audiences (but are not, given the way the term is understood today, adult films) — were relegated to the art-house. The unintended consequence was that “explicit” and “adult” became subgenres of the art film. And in the contemporary film business, “the art film” has come to mean \$2 million or less at the box office.

While it's the presence of real sex that gives a film an attraction of sorts, the studios and the larger U.S. independents play this same game in reverse. For them, it's a complex game of presence and absence — what gets shot and then what gets shown (and what gets shown in what venue, first in movie theaters and then as restored footage for Unrated so-called director's cuts on DVD). Commercial films are routinely released in a variety of versions and formats suitable for a wealth of exhibition venues: movie theaters, home theaters, pay-per-view, pay-TV, network TV, and airplanes. At select regional movie theaters exhibitors have taken to cutting scenes out of films to suit local community standards. In American Fork, Utah, for example, the owner of the Towne Cinema cut the nude sketch scene out of *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997). Since the theater lived up to its financial obligation and restored the film to its original form before returning it to Paramount, the studio decided not to do or say anything. Film content is infinitely malleable these days just as the studios maintain that their copyrights are inviolate.[7]

To see how graphic simulated sexual content is marketed in commercial films, let's look at Lions Gate's prestige release *Monster's Ball*, released in November 2001, one month after the New York Film Festival screening of



*Intimacy*. In the 2001 holiday movie preview edition of *Entertainment Weekly*, *Monster's Ball* was touted with regard to footage audiences would never see (on the big screen at least).

"In order to avoid the NC-17 rating, (director Marc) Forster was forced to trim about a minute from the raw sex scene between (Halle) Berry and (Billy Bob) Thornton." But don't fret, the magazine gushed, the scene still "clocks in at a heavy breathing 3 1/2 minutes." [8]

(The folks at the Classification and Ratings Administration or CARA are notoriously fond of their stop-watches, so the journalists at *EW* were smart to take out theirs as well). The film, in its censored form, was then positioned in the marketplace as something so real, so serious, so committed, it had to be reigned in, it had to be softened for public consumption. Here we see how censorship in Hollywood can be used to at once advertise a movie (as "hot") and enhance industry public relations (trumpeting the continued efficacy and value of the MPAA's rating system, which in this case forced cuts in an intense simulated sex scene).



According to the timekeepers at *Entertainment Weekly*, the release cut of the steamy sex scene between Halle Berry and Billy Bob Thornton in Marc Forster's *Monster's Ball* (2001) "clocks in at a heavy breathing 3 1/2 minutes."

By 2001, the film's female star had plenty of experience exploiting this ad-man's game of what you see and what you get. Six months earlier, Berry appeared in the action-comedy *Swordfish* (Dominic Sena, 2001) a film widely hawked as a chance to see Berry's breasts for the first time on screen. [9] Berry, by the way, received a \$500,000 bonus for agreeing to go topless in the film. Her performance in *Monster's Ball* was called brave in many of the reviews and she received an Oscar for Best Actress the following spring. [10]



Halle Berry received a \$500,000 bonus for agreeing to appear topless in Dominic Sena's *Swordfish* (2001).

At the very moment real sex films reached U.S. art houses, market research had the studios moving in the opposite direction, softening modest-budget R-rated pictures for PG-13 release. The strategy mostly failed in part because the PG-13 versions seemed silly rather than just safe. For example, the PG-13 theatrical release of the 2001 teen picture *Soul Survivors* (Stephen Carpenter) sported a shower scene featuring two beautiful young actresses (Eliza Dushku and Melissa Sagemuller) both fully clothed, an emblem for the not so brave new Hollywood. *Soul Survivors* was subsequently released with an R rating on DVD in what its distributor Artisan called an "unburied cut." *Soul Survivors* earned around \$3 million at the box office against a \$14 million production budget. A nude shower scene would have helped. It couldn't have hurt.



The PG-13 theatrical release of the 2001 teen picture *Soul Survivors* (Stephen Carpenter) sported a shower scene featuring two beautiful young actresses (Eliza Dushku and Melissa Sagemuller) both fully clothed, an emblem for the not so brave new Hollywood.

*Rollerball* (John McTiernan), a spring 2002 release, was also cut from an R to a PG-13. The filmmakers trimmed time off of a couple of the violent scenes and cut out altogether a very brief sequence involving Rebecca Romjin-Stamos and a sauna. Like *Soul Survivors*, *Rollerball* was a bomb. It cost \$70 million to make and grossed less than \$20 million. The DVD is rated R, but as with *Soul Survivors*, the PG-13-rated original cooled interest in subsequent formats.



In order to see this brief sequence showing Rebecca Romjin-Stamos nude in a sauna in John McTiernan's *Rollerball* (2002) you have to rent the director's cut DVD.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The titillating poster for Wayne Wang's *The Center of the World* (2001).

That the studios and major independents seem to be softening their product lines to suit the family values crowd is no real surprise. The religious right emerged at the end of the 20th Century as not only a political force but a pain in the neck on the public relations front for studio Hollywood. First Amendment advocates are far less likely than evangelicals to publicly threaten studios with boycotts when film content doesn't suit them and it's hard to imagine anyone rallying to oppose cuts in *Rollerball*.<sup>[11]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

As the studios moved into tamer territory and the R-rating became at once easier to get and riskier at the box office, X, NC-17 and Unrated films have become almost exclusively the sort of product released by the smaller independents. Indeed, though the studios have moved over the past decade or so to assimilate some of the lower budget/lower return independent market (through Sony Classics, Fox Searchlight, Disney's Miramax etc.), they have steered clear of NC-17, X and Unrated material. Take Todd Solondz's 1998 drama *Happiness*, for example. First slated to be an October Films release, corporate parent Universal (owned at the time by Seagram) balked at releasing an NC-17 film. In the eleventh hour, the film was returned to its production company Good Machine. In limited play, thanks to the NC-17 rating and the absence of studio money behind it, *Happiness* took in just under \$3 million at the box office, a few hundred thousand less than it cost to produce. The original cut of Solondz's follow-up, *Storytelling* (2001), received an NC-17 from the MPAA thanks to a long, full figure inter-racial sex scene in which a white female creative writing student, bullied into a sex act with her African American professor, is urged into shouting a racist phrase as a turn-on for her aggressor. Unwilling or unable to reshoot, Solondz opted to digitally shroud the scene to obtain an R-rating. When the movie screened in theaters and then aired on premium cable channels, the print sported a huge red rectangle obscuring the bodies in the frame. The racist comments, though, remain audible throughout

Sometimes films, like Wayne Wang's *The Center of the World*, also released in 2001, can not be cut to accommodate an R-rating. The film is about a dot.com millionaire who pays a stripper to accompany him to Las Vegas. The deal they strike is something we must accept as viewers: no penetration, no kissing on the mouth, and a strict time limit. Like the British import *Intimacy*, *The Center of the World* alludes to *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1973). It's about sex in the absence of emotional connection, the fantasy "zipless fuck" extolled by Erica Jong in her freewheeling, sexually explicit 1973 novel *Fear of Flying*.<sup>[12]</sup>

There's no real sex in *The Center of the World*. And despite gestures towards realism (the hand-held, documentary-style digital video), it is in the end just another sexy U.S. movie melodrama about a rich businessman who buys a woman, falls in love with her, and then has to figure out a way to live without her: *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990) with a down ending. *The Center of the World* was released without an MPAA rating. It would have gotten an NC-17 for sure, because the simulated sex takes up so much screen time and the film's premise (that kissing on the mouth and intercourse are out)



introduced the sort of “unconventional acts” that always seem to trouble the raters at CARA.

Promoting an Unrated film is difficult. Artisan, which distributed *The Center of the World*, struggled to get the film booked. Many newspapers refuse to take ads for films without an MPAA rating and advertising on TV for Unrated titles is impossible. Artisan did what it could with *The Center of the World* by turning to the web. The terrific, very suggestive web-site for *The Center of the World* offered visitors the opportunity to “make” the stripper strip and chat with her afterwards. The lobby poster for *The Center of the World* was certainly eye-catching. It shows a stripper suggestively sucking on a lollipop. The poster sums up Artisan’s promotion strategy; the company hawked the film the only way they could, as a sex(y) film. But the truth of the matter was (as with most advertising come-ons) at once different and in an important way less than satisfying. *The Center of the World* goes no-place closer to a cinematic real sex than its ostensible model, *Last Tango in Paris*, a picture Norman Mailer famously dismissed as

“a fuck film without a fuck — like a western without horses.”[13]

Porn movies insist that what we’re seeing is real in the most obvious physical sense of the term. Such films offer proof of this reality at regular intervals. But porn is also a performance; the sex is performed by professionals. So what’s fake and what’s not is not irrelevant, it’s just a different sort of question. In *The Center of the World*, the film’s premise prohibits realization, it puts arbitrary limits on what can and can’t be shown.

*The Center of the World* grossed just over a million dollars in the spring and summer of 2001 and at one point played on 45 screens[14]— a lot for an indie sex title but insignificant in light of the average studio release at the time. Ridley Scott’s *Hannibal*, for example, released two months earlier, opened on over 3,200 screens.[15] Just as the rating system opens up the marketplace for *Hannibal* — an R-rated, disturbingly violent commercial film released by the major Hollywood studio MGM — it closes things down for adult-themed independents like *The Center of the World*. [16]

## Real sex as realism

The vast majority of real-sex titles aspire to a cine-realism and “use” real sex on screen to further that claim. *The Idiots* (Lars von Trier, 1998), for example, does so in service of *Dogme 95*, a manifesto that demands of its practitioner a cinematic asceticism. The claustrophobic video scale of *The Idiots*, which was shot by the director Lars von Trier on videotape not only approximates a documentary realism (in his use of natural light and non-professional actors) but it also attends the formal markers of home-grown, amateur, gonzo porn. By the time we get to the real sex insert at the end of the film, the images seem to have less to do with hardcore than with *Dogme*, less to do with titillation than with a commitment to a cine-realism that encompasses style (all that shaky hand held video work) and content (the naked, human emotions on display, the moment at which the actors are no longer acting, they’re fucking).



The offending scene ....

In *The Idiots*, von Trier follows a group of young anarchists posing as crazy or mentally challenged “idiots” who descend upon bourgeois haunts to make a scene that is at once awkward, embarrassing and, funny. The film ends with a brief birthday orgy as the characters continue to play-act as idiots. In the original cut we see an erect penis and two shots of actual penetration. The shots appear within the flow of the scene; like everything else, erection and



... in Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998)...



... absent black boxes.

penetration are just some things that happen while the camera is running. The real sex inserts fit the larger ideological and cinematic goals of *The Idiots*; and while von Trier is a provocateur, his provocation at once exceeds and complicates the few seconds of real sex footage. As the *Village Voice* reviewer J. Hoberman points out, von Trier's *The Idiots* "plumbs the depths of smirky neo-primitivism." [17] The "smirk" is the key gesture here.

Despite the real-sex inserts, *The Idiots* was approved by censorship boards in over thirty European and Asian countries, but posed problems in two big markets: the UK and the US. In something of a prank, von Trier submitted in both the UK and the US two versions of the film — the original cut and a version with outsized black boxes covering up the offending genitalia, a comical gesture utilizing and lampooning the sort of black-box censorship routinely used in Japan. This too was a provocation — an attempt to poke fun at the arbitrary censorship in the UK and the US. But to the director's surprise, censors in the UK gave the uncut film its seal of approval, albeit under its strictest release designation. As the British censorship board announced to the press:

"We considered the view of real sex and group sex to be so brief and so crucial to the story ... that it was OK." [18]

Unsurprisingly, the MPAA looked only at the censored version and when they finally got back to von Trier, they asked for more black boxes. Von Trier complied and *The Idiots* opened quietly on two screens in April 2000 and grossed just over \$7,000.

The realist impulse seems in play as well in the far more extensively explicit real sex French import *Baise Moi*. The film was directed by two women, Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, neither with a previous credit behind the camera, though Thi is a veteran porn actress, having appeared in such films as *100% Blow Jobs Volume 4* (John Yuma, 2002). *Baise Moi* presents an unpretty case for the way many women are mistreated in contemporary society — a case made stronger, the directors argue, by the degree to which the actresses (Raffaella Anderson and Karen Lancaume, AKA Karen Bach) [19] and actors go to make that point. Authenticity then is not only a matter of cinematic proof, hence the penetration shots, the raw, documentary quality of the sex scenes, but it also signals a selfless dedication on the part of the players to their craft, a seriousness of purpose on the part of the filmmakers in the telling of the film's story.



Real sex in Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's *Baise Moi* (2000).

But such a cine-realism has its limits. The sex is real, but the violence in *Baise Moi* is staged. The rape that sets the plot in motion isn't a rape; the actors and actresses have, for money, agreed to play the scene as written. The penetration shot that punctuates the scene reveals a conflation on the part of the filmmakers between a sex scene (which they consistently play unflinchingly straight) and a violent scene (which, even given the filmmakers' commitment to realism, must be staged, choreographed, and faked). The filmmakers may be on the smart or right or safe side of a double standard of sorts ... but it's still a double standard.



Gaspar Noe's *Irreversible* (2002) presents an unflinching and almost unwatchable pornographic violence.

A number of contemporary French films like Gaspar Noe's *I Stand Alone* (1998) and *Irreversible* (2002) have a similar seriousness of purpose through an unflinching and thus almost unwatchable pornographic violence. Still, there are no claims that the actors themselves are hurt, that they must, in order to play these characters, experience in any real way the pain they suffer or inflict. While certain scenes in *I Stand Alone*, *Irreversible*, and *Baise Moi* are purposefully displeasing, these films' success depends on the sensation (within the film world, with audiences) created by the directors' refusal to



temper the material. The films are thus at once realistic and sensational — X-treme films for a popular culture hooked on the X-games.

## Real-sex inserts

A number of real sex films feature brief (and easily excised) hardcore images, what in the trade are called inserts. These hardcore images, often shot in close-up and in certain cases facilitating the use of body doubles (as in the Dogme 95 film *The Idiots*), are literally inserted into an otherwise conventional, simulated sex scene.

Foreign-made art films that transcend (and largely ignore) the prevailing censorship regime have been a staple of the art-house circuit since 1934 when Samuel Cummins arranged for the release of the notorious Czech film *Ecstasy* (Gustav Machaty), featuring Hedy Kiesler, later Hedy Lamarr, dashing through the woods in the buff. The use of a real sex insert in an otherwise softcore import screened uncut in the United States dates to Marco Bellocchio's 1986 feature, *Devil in the Flesh*, which features a single, medium-close shot of oral sex performed by the actress Maruschka Detmers on the actor Federico Pitzalis. The film reviewer Roger Ebert contended that the oral sex scene was in large part a publicity stunt, but after doing so, Bellocchio raised some interesting questions about the formal and ideological complications of real sex on screen:

“Bellocchio has at least assured a lot of attention for *Devil in the Flesh* by including an explicit and lengthy scene of fellatio in the movie, one that qualifies it for the X rating. Watching it, I wondered what it had to do with anything else in the story. That characters engage in a given sexual practice is one thing. That the camera shows them doing it for a longish period of time is another. Explicit sexuality has the strangest power to turn a narrative film into a documentary: The moment the characters take off their clothes and get down to business, we aren't looking at characters anymore, we're looking at naked actors.”[20]



The notorious oral sex insert in Marco Bellocchio's 1986 feature, *Devil in the Flesh*.

Patrice Cheareau's *Intimacy*, a 2001 real sex insert film from Great Britain, was anxiously touted as a milestone in the history of film censorship. As AC Grayling from *The Guardian* newspaper wrote:



"[*Intimacy*] delivers an important blow to a ridiculous taboo" [regarding real sex on screen] by allowing such things [as an erect penis and an oral sex scene] to appear in mainstream cinema, rather than leaving them to the bracketed-off realm of pornography ... it allows them to be incorporated more fully into [a] debate about life's natural experience."[21]

*Intimacy*, according to the reviewer, thus achieves a heightened cinematic realism because it depicts real and realistic sex. But it's not pornographic because it participates in a debate of sorts; its attraction is intellectual not carnal.

A month after Grayling's article, a parallel story emerged in the pages of *The Guardian*, recalling Ebert's contention that with real sex on screen "we aren't looking at characters anymore, we're looking at naked actors." Still a full month before *Intimacy*'s twenty-seven-screen UK first run, Alexander Linklater, the real life boyfriend and real sex partner of the film's star Kerry Fox, weighed in on what it's like to live with a serious actress who has serious real sex on screen with another guy. Linklater wrote:

"I would ... wait while [Kerry] left for rehearsals to practice sex with Mark, and [then come] back home. Then I would have to wait while she went on the set, undressed with Mark, took him in her arms, helped him reach a state of arousal, and came back home again. And eventually, I would have to watch, along with a sizable public, in the magnificent magnified detail of widescreen cinema, everything they'd done together. Or after editing, not quite everything. Which is the worst? Seeing nothing, or something, or everything?"[22]

Making art is often about taking chances and everyone involved in the production of *Intimacy* seems to have embraced that ideal. Still there were boundaries, limits. When President Bill Clinton maintained that he "did not have sex" with Monica Lewinsky, he was, according to a certain narrow definition of the phrase "to have sex," telling the truth. It was a matter of semantics, perhaps, but it also reflected a certain attitude shared by a lot of Americans. Such a distinction proved useful for Linklater as well:

"The final question was, would they be having penetrative sex? Logical or not, that was the impassible barrier for me, and for Kerry also."

Later in the same interview:

"There is oral sex, which you see, and there is the extremely effective illusion of two ordinary people making desperate love."

So why show any real sex, however fleeting, however arbitrary, however limited and restricted (to one sort of act, once, with the stopwatch running)? Linklater's answer:

"It is to take the internal logic of a work of art to a conclusion; that is its integrity."[23]

But of course the actors don't go all the way, and so the film, by this logic, doesn't either.

Fox appreciated from the start that she was taking "a chance on the kind of



Simulated sex in ...



... Patrice Cheareau's *Intimacy* (2001).



The real (oral) sex ...

sex Patrice (Chereau) was portraying in *Intimacy*.” Indeed she referred to a sort of artistic submission:



... insert sequence ....

"I agreed to do [the film], to give myself over to Patrice and to trust him completely. That was the sort of agreement I made with myself, that I wouldn't get too precious, and, as a result, I really surprised myself and did work I didn't think possible." [24]

Fox's reflections here support her boyfriend's assertion, however duplicitous and possibly insulting to his paramour, that while the sex in *Intimacy* looks real (and at one moment at least one of the intimate acts is),

"it is not particularly erotic." ... "It doesn't blur the line between the art-house movie and [hardcore] video. It makes it clearer."

In her essay "Cinema and the Sex Act," Linda Williams applauds the way Chereau uses explicitness to highlight what is (unlike hardcore) a relationship between two real (as in not air-brushed or surgically enhanced) people to whose real lives we seem to have gained intimate access. The film's title, then, refers to the relationship between the two characters in the film, Jay and Claire, and also to the relationship between the viewer and the images on screen. For Williams, the key scene in *Intimacy* occurs when Claire takes Jay's penis in her hand and strokes it — an intimate gesture that for many in the audience constitutes a real act (though perhaps not what they'd consider a real act of real sex). [25] Williams writes,



... in *Intimacy* (2001).

"While I do not suppose that this gesture is at all uncommon in the contemporary repertoires of heterosexual sex, I found myself shocked to see such an intimate, familiar gesture on film."

For Williams, what makes the scene "shocking" — an interesting choice of words for an academic who is pretty hard to shock — is its capture of the commonplace. But if we accept Williams' view of things, this scene in particular complicates the tentative and arbitrary distinctions drawn by Fox (no vaginal penetration) and by Linklater (no "sex"), because it questions our comfortable notions of acting and performing. In hardcore, acting is pretty much beside the point and performing is an end in itself. The characters in *Intimacy* are played by accomplished actors, but are they acting or performing? Or both? Williams argues:

"To 'act' a scene in which the action is sex is, in these explicit moments, to really engage in sex." [27]

The goal of the real sex inserts in *Intimacy* is not to recreate a moment in the life of two fictional characters, but for the actors to capture and for the viewer to witness some sort of real intimacy that happens when the actors are asked to do more than just simulate some real physical act. If, as Williams suggests, the film succeeds on this score, the brief glimpses of real sex are not only not a gimmick, they are among the rare moments on film when what we are watching and investing and believing in is real.

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Sex as narrative

The 1999 Korean film *Lies* offers a brief glimpse at a real sex act (of fellatio again), but unlike the real sex insert films discussed above, it features an astonishing on-screen sex to on-screen narrative ratio: by my stopwatch, 90% sex, 10% exposition.



One in a series of sadomasochistic encounters in the 1999 Korean film *Lies* (Jang Sun Woo).

*Lies* quite deliberately alludes to Nagisa Oshima's 1976 real sex melodrama *In the Realm of the Senses*. Both films share a similar sex to narrative ratio (to the extent that the sex scenes are the narrative). Both use sex scenes of extended duration and of increasing intensity and personal risk to make clear the point that the characters are really obsessed with (having sex with) each other. Jang Sun Woo, the writer-director of *Lies*, endeavored to depict a couple — in this case the 18 year old schoolgirl Y (Kim Tae Yeon) and her thirtysomething sculptor paramour J (Lee Sang Hyun) — so absorbed in “their dream of living, eating, and fucking without having to work” that the trappings of bourgeois existence fade into the background. Woo accomplishes this by focusing so extensively on sex in scenes shot with hand-held cameras, what the *Village Voice* reviewer J. Hoberman described as “a loose, semi-verite” style.”[28][[open endnotes in new window](#)] The net effect is at once realistic and daunting, and the risk of (or is it the plan behind) including so much simulated sex is that by some point in the film we feel like we've seen enough (sex, whipping, etc.). It's no longer fun for us and it doesn't look like it's much fun anymore for Y and J. Sitting through it all is I suppose a necessary process by which we recognize the distinction between a love affair (the codes of which we readily recognize on screen) and whatever sort of mutual abuse the characters in *Lies* indulge in when the sex games so completely take over their lives (and the film).





A sequence late Nagisa Oshima's 1976 real sex melodrama *In the Realm of the Senses* shows the lovers experimenting with sex and death.

The 2004 British import *9 Songs*, directed by Michael Winterbottom, similarly tracks an intense relationship through a series of intense sex scenes and like both *Lies* and *In the Realm of the Senses*, narrative is expressed physically, sexually on screen. *9 Songs* presents a series of explicit, real sex scenes interrupted briefly by live concert footage featuring contemporary rock bands. The sex in *9 Songs* is real. While it is far less shocking than the real sex in *Baise Moi* (which is used mostly to disturb us) and far more fun for everyone concerned (the characters and the viewer) than in *Romance*, it is used (as it is in these other real sex films) to make somehow more real the clearly fictional lives of the characters in the film.



We look over Matt's (Kieran O'Brien's) shoulder at Lisa (Margot Stille) masturbating in Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs* (2004). The scene proves to be the turning point in the film.

Such a realist strategy neatly fits Winterbottom's *oeuvre*. He is an auteur who has successfully mixed fiction and fact in such films as the political thriller *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1994), his valentine to the Manchester music scene *24 Hour Party People* (2002) and most recently *A Mighty Heart* (2007), the political melodrama about the abduction of the journalist Daniel Pearl (Dan Futterman) and his wife Marianne's (Angelina Jolie) failed attempt to save him. In each of these films, Winterbottom breaks down the markers of fact and fiction with documentary-style camerawork, real lighting, real locales, frequent strategic shifts from conventional third person fictional storytelling to videotaped interviews that break the fourth wall, and home-video-style footage that seems to capture life — real life — as it unfolds. Winterbottom has also used explicit (albeit simulated) sex scenes in films like *Jude* (a 1996 adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*) and the steamy melodrama *I Want You* (1998). Both films contain full frontal nudity and explicit simulated sex scenes featuring major (legit) female film stars: Kate Winslet in *Jude* and Rachel Weisz in *I Want You*. This strategy suggests that the work is so absorbing and powerful, that (even) these commercially successful actresses were willing to go further (they were willing to show more skin) than in any other film.





A closer look (and tighter shot) of Lisa masturbating in Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs* (2004).



Two shots from the first of two graphic sex scenes that conclude *9 Songs* shows real (oral) sex ....



... followed by a money shot.

*9 Songs* is composed almost entirely of documentary footage. The concerts are shot live in real venues. The cameras move through the club just as the patrons must in such a hectic, crowded space, and we never get the sense that these scenes are rehearsed or “produced.” They are simply recorded. The sex scenes seem also to be documented as opposed to performed for the camera, and even the handful of seemingly random domestic scenes seem captured as they happen. There’s no effort made to integrate scenes into anything resembling a narrative. Indeed, the effect is that *Winterbottom* has picked up random moments in a relationship that is, finally, little more than the sum of sexual acts. They eat. They fuck. They go to concerts. What little narrative trajectory we get is expressed in the bedroom. For example, we get a hint that the relationship is in trouble not from anything they say, but from a sexual act. In what begins as just another random domestic scene, we see Matt (Kieran O’Brien) as he is preparing dinner. Eventually, he wanders over to the bedroom to find Lisa (Margot Stille). She’s in bed masturbating. He watches, and thus we watch from his point of view, as the scene takes us from her arousal to orgasm. But while the scene is plenty erotic — for him and for us — we also recognize that she is taking care of business without him, a plot point of some power thanks to a single reaction shot that lets us know that Matt knows what this scene means. When Lisa later tells him that she’s leaving for the United States, Matt is hurt but not surprised.

The masturbation scene is the film’s true turning point, the 2/3 mark at which their relationship begins to move towards closure. The scene immediately precedes the film’s two most explicitly depicted encounters: the first, a long oral sex scene (Lisa taking Matt’s penis in her mouth) — a sequence that is punctuated by a money shot. The second scene attends their last bout of intercourse and includes shots proving vaginal penetration. These two scenes show the characters clinging to the one thing that really worked in their relationship. They lived together for a while and went to some concerts. Then she left. The effect is the rather politically conservative notion that absent love, sex is just sex. And no matter how hard Matt tries to render the story in romantic terms, the film’s real sex, itself divorced of love (the actors after all are doing a job and the documentary-style camera captures that labor), so dominates the film, so clearly is what the film is about, that there is no room at the end for sentiment.

*Winterbottom*’s original scheme for *9 Songs* was fairly simple. As he explained in an interview,

“I wanted to see if you could take a very simple premise — two people in bed making love — if you filmed it closely enough, honestly enough and in enough detail, maybe you could capture something of the atmosphere of a relationship, something of the atmosphere of being in love, without seeing much beyond that.”

Given such a premise, the “heart of the film [would be] sex.” And in the film there is little else.

## Real sex U.S. style

U.S.-made real sex films compose a fairly small indie genre. Virtually all are released Unrated, which is to say that they are never submitted to the MPAA. Real sex films are screened at only very select art-houses. This is less a matter



The final sexual encounter between Matt and Lisa in *9 Songs* includes this shot showing vaginal penetration. Note that he (Matt/Kieran O'Brien) is wearing a condom.



Matt and Lisa lounge in the tub in a quiet, reflective moment in *9 Songs*.

of censorship than basic economics. Art-houses are generally independently owned. Independent theater owners live and work in the community and depend in large part on a loyal and local customer base. Before screening a real sex film, the art-house theater owner must assess the risks of showing such a picture to his/her customers. Also worrisome is the risk of pissing off fellow local businessmen or worse the city management (with its host of fire, health and building inspectors).

Domestic real sex titles are seldom released to more than a handful of theaters and most are difficult (or even impossible) to find on DVD. Case in point: Larry Clark's *Ken Park* (2002), which loosely tracks the lives of some young men and women slacking their way through the boredom and emptiness of suburban life in Visalia, California. Clark, a still photographer who specializes in disturbing portraits of disturbed, alienated teenagers is best known to U.S. art-house filmgoers for his 1999 film about urban skater-punks, *Kids*, a documentary-style film rather dominated by scenes of simulated teen sex performed by actors who look shockingly young. Clark utilizes the same documentary-style in *Ken Park*: hand-held camera, non-professional actors, real locations, and natural lighting to lend a realistic cast to a fictional story. But while *Kids* stopped short of showing real sex on screen, *Ken Park* ends with an explicit male-female-male threesome that includes explicitly depicted oral sex and intercourse. The un-simulated sex scene seems in many ways just another stunt for a director whose work seems designed to exploit our worst fears about the lives of the young and restless. As Michael Rechtshaffen of the *Hollywood Reporter* wrote about the film:

"Given Clark's preoccupation with teens in their underpants (and out of them), the is-it-art-or-is-it-exploitative-smut debate isn't going to be settled anytime soon." [29]



The real sex sequence in Larry Clark's *Ken Park* (2002).

*Ken Park* played to packed houses at the Venice and Toronto Film Festivals, but Clark initially failed to find a domestic distributor for the film. It was eventually picked up by Vitagraph Films, the distributor of the low budget Bruce Campbell *tour de force*, *Bubba Ho-tep* (Don Coscarelli, 2002) and little else even the most avid art-house patron might recognize. To date, *Ken Park* has not been released on DVD in the U.S. The film is thus notorious but little seen.

Also little seen but much talked-about is Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny*, which ends with a three minute oral sex scene. Like *Ken Park* and many of the European art-porn films, *The Brown Bunny* is shot in a realist style. Gallo makes use of a low budget, naturally-lit look and he uses non-professional actors in significant roles. Such an aesthetic supports Gallo's contention that the final real sex scene is just an extension of an already insistent cinematic realism and a seriousness of purpose in which the actors, in this case Gallo himself and his then girlfriend, the actress Chloe Sevigny, are willing to do anything for their art. In a review for the *New York Times* Manohla Dargis put the final scene in a peculiar but nonetheless illuminating context:

"Even in the age of girls gone wild it's genuinely startling to see a name actress throw caution and perhaps her career to the wind. But give the woman credit. Actresses have been asked and even bullied into performing similar acts for filmmakers since the movies began, usually behind closed doors. Ms. Sevigny isn't hiding behind anyone's desk. She says her lines with feeling and puts her iconoclasm right out there where everyone can see it; she may be nuts, but she's also unforgettable." [30]

The critical consensus, especially with regard to the film's initial Cannes Film Festival cut, was that the director Vincent Gallo is nuts too. The *Screen International* poll held annually at the festival gave *The Brown Bunny* its lowest rating ever. The popular film reviewer Roger Ebert hated the film:

"In May of 2003 I walked out of the press screening of Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny* at the Cannes Film Festival and was asked by a camera crew(member) what I thought of the film. I said I thought it was the worst film in the history of the festival. That was hyperbole — I hadn't seen every film in the history of the festival — but I was still vibrating from one of the most disastrous screenings I had ever attended."

Gallo responded by calling Ebert "a fat pig." Ebert countered:

"I will one day be thin, but Vincent Gallo will always be the director of *The Brown Bunny*."

Ebert proceeded to lose over eighty pounds. And Gallo, still the director of *The Brown Bunny*, cut almost 30 minutes from the film's two-hour running time, cuts that prompted Ebert to revise his initial impression of the film. In his far more positive review of the 93 minute release cut of *The Brown Bunny*, Ebert had the following to say about the final scene:

Yes, it is explicit, and no, it is not gratuitous." [31]





Writer, director, actor Vincent Gallo claimed that the real (oral) sex sequence that ends *The Brown Bunny* (2003) was the logical end point for the film's insistent cinematic realism.

The most successful U.S. real sex film to date is John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus*, which opened on just six screens in October 2006, then on positive word-of-mouth expanded to over sixty screens in its third week of release. The film eventually grossed nearly \$2 million, a respectable run for any art house film, let alone one with ample gay-male content.[32]

What distinguishes *Shortbus* from previous real sex indies and imports is its exuberance, the notion that sex (and sex on film) might actually be fun. This harkens back to the “different strokes for different folks” spirit of the groundbreaking 1972 porn film *Deep Throat*, which promoted an egalitarianism, a democracy of on-screen sex. Several mainstream reviewers celebrated Mitchell's novel approach. David Ansen of *Newsweek* wrote:

“Other films (mainly foreign) have certainly given us totally explicit sex before. Think of Catherine Breillat's *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*. Or the grittily aggressive *Baise Moi*. But these were all films that rewarded prurience with punishment (in the form of either graphically unpleasant sex or windy French philosophizing). Mitchell brings an all-American cheerfulness to his sex romp, a native-born faith in the therapeutic benefits of unfettered desire.”

With regard to the film's orgy finale, Ansen shrugged off all the real sex on screen, concluding,

“This is XXX with a happy face.”[33]

The *New York Times*' Manohla Dargis similarly commented upon the film's happy feel:

“Mr. Mitchell isn't the first nonpornographic filmmaker to incorporate sexually explicit material into his work, but he may be the most optimistic and good natured.”[34]





The orgy sequence at the end of John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* (2006).

Dargis went so far as to assert that the final scene in *Shortbus* offers not only an answer for the lonely twentysomethings in the film but a model for filmmakers in Hollywood:

“Mr. Mitchell finds his happy ending in raucous music and warm caresses, in an oceanic feeling in which everyone is free to be freakily you and me. His idealism is pleasingly touching and just maybe a bit naïve. It’s an idealism that feels out of place next to the hot-to-trot television housewives, panting pop divas, cringingly graphic memoirs and novels in which sex is an index of late capitalism at its most bleak. Certainly it’s deeply, if promisingly, at odds with an U.S. movie mainstream that has grown progressively more prudish about sex over the last three decades, while its representations of violence have grown more obscenely violent. Hollywood says let it bleed. Mr. Mitchell would rather we get off on life.”[35]

## Parting glances

Regimes of censorship are inevitably capricious, ambiguous, and inconsistent, yet they reflect upon the culture they serve in ways that are at once telling and troubling. The Classification and Rating Administration (CARA), which rates films for the MPAA, makes possible the wide release of R-rated torture films like *Saw* and *Hostel*, yet offers no “legitimate” designation for a sweet-natured (adults-only) real-sex film like *Shortbus*. *Saw IV*, the R-rated installment of the popular torture film series released during the same twelve month period as *Shortbus*, opened on more than 3,000 screens nationwide and grossed over \$60 million in its first 2 months in release. That’s 2,940 more screens than the reigning real-sex box office champion *Shortbus* reached at its peak and roughly thirty times its theatrical gross.

There’s more to this than the obvious double standard at the MPAA regarding sex and violence. The *Shortbus/Saw IV* comparison reveals the ways in which industrial policy and practice drives cultural standards. In the marginalization of art-house porn and in the mainstream commercial success of disturbingly violent horror films, we find our society not so much mirrored but reified by MPAA censorship policies and procedures. We are fascinated by violence in even its most extreme and hideous representation, and we are

willing to indulge this fascination with few (if any) limits. Sex, especially real sex, makes us nervous ... so nervous that if it can be shown (in any legitimate venue) it must be, it better be “art.” Art has become as much a matter of commerce as aesthetics. That is, by labeling something art you pretty much guarantee a small audience, one that is marginal to (and systematically marginalized by) U.S. pop culture.

Looking back on that evening in 1964 at Stanley Kubrick’s house, the notion of a commercially viable real-sex film was little more than a passing subject of drunken or stoned speculation. No doubt, once sober, everyone at the gathering appreciated that there was little hope that such a film could be made at the time. Now, well over forty years later, we’re really no closer to seeing a real-sex studio film. But we have seen the mainstreaming of a sort of horrific violence that would have been no less unthinkable in 1964. So let’s ask the obvious question: which is the more obscene: *Shortbus* or *Saw IV*? I think it is an easy question to answer, but one the film industry is disinclined to examine or discuss. Commenting on the writhing bodies in the climactic orgy scene in *Shortbus*, a character exclaims (speaking as much to the images on screen as to our present cultural predicament):

“It’s just like the 60s, only with less hope.”

It’s a curious pay-off line for such an upbeat film, but nonetheless telling.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



Torture as entertainment in the 2007 horror film *Saw IV* (Darren Lynn Bousman).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

[1] This is a story Southern was fond of telling. I have heard and read slightly different versions over the years. Here and elsewhere in this opening section I will stick to the version Southern told an interviewer for the on-line magazine *Smoke Signals*. See:

[www.carminestreet.com/smoke\\_signals.html#terrysouthern](http://www.carminestreet.com/smoke_signals.html#terrysouthern).

[\[return to page 1 of essay\]](#)

[2] [www.carminestreet.com/smoke\\_signals.html#terrysouthern](http://www.carminestreet.com/smoke_signals.html#terrysouthern).

[3] [www.carminestreet.com/smoke\\_signals.html#terrysouthern](http://www.carminestreet.com/smoke_signals.html#terrysouthern)

[4] "Sex on Screen: Porn or Art?" *China Daily*, October 11, 2006, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/lifestyle/2006-10/11/content\\_705976.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/lifestyle/2006-10/11/content_705976.htm).

[5] The MPAA has strict rules about movie advertisements like one-sheets, newspaper ads and trailers. The Advertising Administration (supervised by the MPAA) offers the following description of their task: "The film industry wants to ensure that all advertising for rated films is appropriate for viewing by the general public. Therefore, all advertising for films rated by CARA must be submitted to the MPAA Advertising Administration prior to being released to the public. Advertising materials include, but are not limited to, all print ads, radio and TV spots, press kits, outdoor advertising such as billboards, Internet sites, video or DVD packaging, and trailers for both theatrical and home video releases. The Advertising Administration reviews these materials to determine their suitability for general audiences, and to make sure that the advertising is placed appropriately. After its review of submitted materials, the Advertising Administration reports within 24 hours to the submitting distribution company.

Every advertising item must display the film's rating, and may require several revisions before final approval. According to the Advertising Administration guidelines, advertising that is targeted for an audience attending a "G" or "PG" feature will not be approved if it includes scenes depicting violence, sensuality, offensive language, or other material that most parents would find unacceptable for their younger children to see or hear. Film companies do have the option, however, of creating advertising for a limited audience (not including younger children) for whom the material is appropriate, i.e., "restricted" trailers, which may be shown only before "R" and "NC-17" films, restricted-access internet sites, and television spots reserved for late-night audiences."

[http://www.mpaa.org/FlmRat\\_Advertising.asp](http://www.mpaa.org/FlmRat_Advertising.asp).

[6] When a film is produced independently and then picked up by a studio for distribution (at a festival, for example) it's called a negative pick-up (because the studio ostensibly buys the negative).

[7] For a detailed discussion of the MPAA and its unwritten policy on copyrights and venue-based censorship (including film alterations made by theater owners and various Christian conservative outfits see: Jon Lewis, "The Utah Version: Some Notes on the Relative Integrity of the Hollywood Product," *Film International*, 4 (2003/4).

[8] Dave Karger, "Executioner's Song," *Entertainment Weekly*, November 16, 2001, pp. 73-74.

[9] Berry received a \$500,000 bonus for agreeing to go topless in the movie.

[10] A.O. Scott "Monster's Ball" (film review), *New York Times*, December 26, 2001,

[http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?\\_r=1&](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?_r=1&res=9C07EED81531F935A15751C1A9679C8B63&oref=slogin)

[res=9C07EED81531F935A15751C1A9679C8B63&oref=slogin;](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?_r=1&res=9C07EED81531F935A15751C1A9679C8B63&oref=slogin)

and Rene Rodriguez, "Monster's Ball is an eloquent love story," *Miami Herald*, February 8, 2002,

<http://ae.miami.com/entertainment/ui/>

[miami/movie.html?id=57561&reviewId=7666](http://ae.miami.com/entertainment/ui/miami/movie.html?id=57561&reviewId=7666).

[11] Dargis' cautionary remarks for the promising indie actress Chloe Sevigny proved unnecessary. Whatever audiences and more relevantly casting agents and indie film and cable television producers made of *Brown Bunny*, the film has not wrecked Sevigny's career. Indeed, she has since 2003 landed a recurring role on the popular HBO series *Big Love* and appeared in several films including Woody Allen's *Melinda and Melinda* (2004), Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005) and David Fincher's *Zodiac* (2007). While some celebrities have benefited from the release of home made sex tapes — Paris Hilton and Pamela Anderson have both maintained attention in the media absent actual work thanks to the internet traffic attending their real sex performances — Sevigny's post-*Brown Bunny* success likely regards her talent and her unusual look. But it is fair to wonder in this age of easily accessed celebrity porn (via Mr. Skin and celebrity movie archive) just how much real sex might affect a celebrity's career. [[return to page 2](#)]

[12] Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (NY: New American Library, 2003).

[13] Mailer as cited by Richard Falcon in his review of *Intimacy*: "Last Tango in Lewisham," *Sight and Sound*, July 2001,

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/491>.

In an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper, *Center of the World* lead actress Molly Parker remarked that "If anything, I think [Wang] was interested in going much further than he did. But I didn't think it was necessary." Aug 24, 2001.



<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2001/aug/24/artsfeatures2>>

Parker also objected to the way the film was marketed; she remarked that the lurid poster depicting a woman fellating a lollipop “makes no sense to me whatsoever.”

[14] One of those 45 screens was in Cincinnati where a theater owner contracted to screen *The Center of the World* decided he was uncomfortable with some of the footage so he cut it out of the film. When news got back to Artisan, they pulled the film from the theater — protecting their product far more ardently than a studio would have under the same circumstances. For a parallel story about a Utah theater owner making cuts to James Cameron’s *Titanic* see: Jon Lewis, “The Utah Version: Some Notes on the Relative Integrity of the Hollywood Product.”

[15] Between 3200 and 3500 screens was the 2001 industry standard for bigger studio releases. The early summer blockbuster *Pearl Harbor* opened on 3,214 screens; Tim Burton’s much-anticipated remake of *The Planet of the Apes* was released to 3,500 screens and *Jurassic Park III* had its opening weekend on 3,434 screens.

[16] Despite the notoriety, *Baise Moi* and *Intimacy* never played on more than 8 screens.

[17] J. Hoberman, “Arrested Development” *Village Voice*, April 26, 2000, <http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0017,hoberman,14342,20.html>

[18] BBFC People Archive, taken from a *Guardian* article by Brian Pendreigh, <http://www.melonfarmers.co.uk/arbphap.htm>

[19] Both actresses have appeared in several hardcore titles. Launcame/Bach has appeared in such films/videos as *Anal Power 3* (1999) and Anderson starred in *Faust Fucker* (Gabriel Pontello, 1995). Anderson became something of a celebrity after the 2003 documentary by Emmanuelle Schick Garcia, *La Petite Morte*. The film chronicles the story of Anderson’s rape by two men who recognized her from adult films. In Garcia’s film, Anderson recounts how the prosecutor and judge dismissed her account of the events: “You’re an actress in pornographic films, so you can’t complain.”

[20] Roger Ebert, *The Devil in the Flesh* (review), *Chicago Sun Times*, July 10, 1987, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19870710/REVIEWS/707100302/1023>

[21] AC Grayling, “Close Encounters of the Rude Kind,” *The Guardian*, May 17, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/may/17/gender.uk1>.  
Preceding and accompanying the film’s first run in England, *The Guardian* ran a total of eight reviews and feature articles — unusually full coverage

for an art house title.

[22] Alexander Linklater, "Dangerous Liaisons," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2001,  
<http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,511246,00.html>.

[23] Linklater, "Dangerous Liaisons."

[24] Chris Darke, "Truly, Madly, Explicitly," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2001, <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,515108,00.html>.

[25.] A handful of recent exceptions, all with the same intended effect as the "hand job" scene in *Intimacy* are worth noting here, for example: *Sex and Lucia* (released in an edited version theatrically and uncut on DVD) and the opening episode of the HBO series *Tell Me You Love Me*.

[26] Linda Williams, "Cinema and the Sex Act," *Cineaste*, Winter 2001, p. 21. This intimate shot (of a woman stroking a man's penis) occurs in a number of other explicit films of late, including *Lucia y el sexo* and *Lie with Me* (Clement Virgo, 2005).

[27] Williams, "Cinema and the Sex Act," p. 22.

[28] Jang Sun Woo quoted by J. Hoberman, "Imps of the Perverse," *Village Voice*, November 15-21, 2000,  
<http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0046,hoberman,19791,20.html>.  
[[return to page 3](#)]

[29] Michael Rechtshaffen, "Ken Park" (film review), *Hollywood Reporter*, September 27, 2002,  
[http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/search/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1723291](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1723291).

[30] Manohla Dargis, "The Brown Bunny: The Narcissist and His Lover," August 27, 2004,  
<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B07E1D6133EF934A1575BC0A9629C8B63>.

Dargis' cautionary remarks for the promising indie actress Chloe Sevigny proved unwarranted. Whatever audiences and more relevantly casting agents and indie film and cable television producers made of *The Brown Bunny*, the film has not wrecked Sevigny's career. Indeed, she has since 2003 landed a recurring role on the popular HBO series *Big Love* and appeared in several popular films including Woody Allen's *Melinda and Melinda* (2004), Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005) and David Fincher's *Zodiac* (2007). Kerry Fox, the star of *Intimacy*, and Margot Stiley, the star of *Nine Songs*, have continued to land roles. For these three actresses at least, performing real sex in a real sex feature has not adversely affected their careers and has not resulted in any sort of typecasting.

[31] Roger Ebert, "The Brown Bunny" (film review), *Chicago Sun Times*,

September 3, 2004,  
<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040903/REVIEWS/409020301/1023>.

[32] Of the films discussed here, *Shortbus* is the only one with any gay male scenes. A number of recent features have male masturbation scenes, some to on screen climax like Joe Swanberg's *Kissing on the Mouth* (2005). No doubt there are real sex films featuring gay men, but these receive significantly less exposure than the heterosexual films discussed in this essay and are screened at select art-houses.

[33] David Ansen, "Shortbus" (film review), *Newsweek*, October 5, 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15146189/site/newsweek/>.  
Linda Williams, in her review of the film for *Cineaste* (Spring 2007) also dubbed *Shortbus* a "quintessentially American sex film."

[34] Manohla Dargis, "Naughty and Nice in a Carnal Carnival," *New York Times*,  
October 4, 2006,  
<http://movies2.nytimes.com/2006/10/04/movies/04shor.html>.

[35] Manohla Dargis, "Naughty and Nice in a Carnal Carnival," *New York Times*,  
October 4, 2006,  
<http://movies2.nytimes.com/2006/10/04/movies/04shor.html>.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



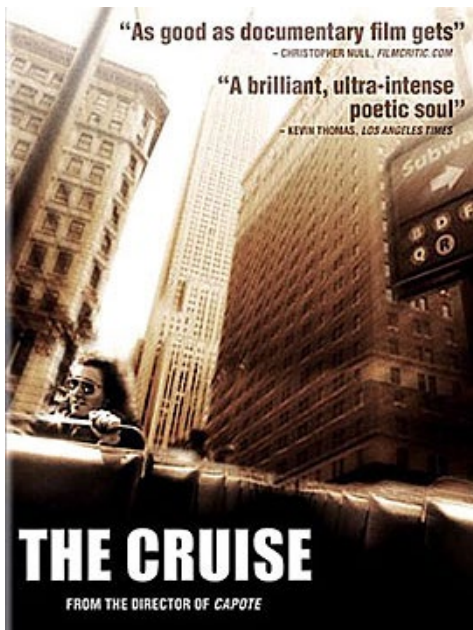
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



"Chip" the raconteur.



*The Cruise* versus "the anti-cruise."

## Documentary and the anamnesis of queer space: *The Polymath, or, The Life and Opinions of Samuel R. Delany, Gentleman*

by [Nicholas de Villiers](#)

"Perhaps cities are deteriorating along with the procedures that organized them. But we must be careful here. ... When [the ministers of knowledge] transform their bewilderment into "catastrophes," when they seek to enclose the people in the "panic" of their discourses, are they once more necessarily right? Rather than remaining within the field of a discourse that upholds its privilege by inverting its content (speaking of catastrophe and no longer of progress), one can try another path: ... one can analyze the microbe-like, singular, and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay..." —Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (95–96)

"But these excesses are, after all, memory itself. They make of life a text, in which time (in both directions), temperament (tenor, texture, and timbre), or merely verbal contiguity is as much the organizer as the random rules of narrative, just as they assure that—to the person seeking a single meaning from any of its images—it remains unmasterable." —Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water* (343)

Fred Barney Taylor's recent documentary portrait of the writer Samuel R. Delany, *The Polymath, or, The Life and Opinions of Samuel R. Delany, Gentleman* (2007), is in fact a double portrait. It is at once an affectionate portrayal of the prolific science fiction author and cultural critic known to his friends as "Chip" and a picture of New York City's changing queer sexual landscape. Delany acts as our "guide," not unlike eccentric New York tour guide Timothy "Speed" Levitch in *The Cruise* (Miller, 1998), whose theories of "the cruise" (pedestrian tactics of enjoyment) versus "the anti-cruise" (controlling technocratic strategies, the ideology of the "grid plan") have great affinity with both Delany and de Certeau. Like Delany's brilliantly reflexive memoir *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village*, Taylor's film illustrates Delany's life through a series of what Roland Barthes called *biographemes* (preferences, inflections, details to which the author might be distilled). And like Delany's more recent book, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Taylor's documentary intervenes in a series of debates about the fate of New York City sexual subcultures and practices after the decimating effects of AIDS and the Forty-second Street Development Project (a provocative





The begrudging “academic rock star.”

connection, to be sure). I will go on to argue that this concern for queer space aligns *The Polymath* with the activist video *Fenced Out* (Paper Tiger Television, 2001) and another recent documentary *Gay Sex in the 70s* (Lovett, 2005).

We could also place *The Polymath* in a series of recent “intellectual profile” documentaries such as *Zizek!* (Taylor, 2005) and *Derrida* (Dick & Kofman, 2002) or perhaps Esther Robinson’s *A Walk into the Sea: Danny Williams and the Warhol Factory* (2007), which has a similar ambient electronic soundtrack. But unlike the acolyte relation established by the painfully earnest questioning of the young directors of those films, we never see Taylor on-screen. Instead we are presented with intertitles identifying extracts from home movies, or with “pull quotes” from the talking-heads style monologues that follow (a somewhat more conventional approach to documentary form).



Describing the demolition going on behind him.



Surreal crumbling city imagery.



New New York.

## Polyglot

The intellectual profile format is established early on: Delany is shown in his apartment surrounded by floor-to-ceiling books, declaring that he is actually a very boring person. He explains, “I’m the kind of person who basically thinks about writing all day long, and all the time.” He reveals that he broke up with a lover who said, “Don’t you think about anything except writing?” to which he admits,

“The sad answer to that is ‘no.’ My perception of myself is there’s not a lot of *me* there, there’s just a big emptiness in which there are a whole lot of words swimming around all the time—sentences, fragments of sentences—that’s how I perceive what *me* is.”



The reluctant “dandy of



deconstruction.”

Astra cannot quite believe Slavoj  
Zizek detests his fans.

Philosophy in the bedroom.

This is obviously reminiscent of Derrida’s public image (in fact we see Delany reading a newspaper profile of Derrida) or of Barthes’s self-characterization,

“I have a disease: I see language” (*Roland* 161; in his memoir Delany acknowledges a kinship with Barthes [*Motion* 15]).

Like Zizek, Delany is not really concerned to normalize himself in the eyes of the viewer. But of course, these documentaries end up humanizing their subjects (Derrida trying to find his keys, Zizek in bed, Delany showing off a scar on his belly to an admiring friend). Taylor also makes use of a rather classic genius-biopic conceit: Delany modestly says,

“I wish I found myself an interesting person—I don’t. I think of myself as I walk through life as the world’s most ordinary, dull, boring black faggot.”

But obviously we *are* encouraged to find Delany an interesting person, and we are encouraged to ponder those deceptively simple categories of identity interrogated throughout *The Motion of Light in Water*: “a black man...? A gay man...? A writer...?” (356). These are also the terms by which Delany is “claimed” by various figures in the film: at the National Black Writers Conference, Walter Mosley is shown praising Delany’s genius and stressing, “He belongs to us, and most of us don’t know it. And even those of us who know it, don’t know how to celebrate it.” (An early example of claiming Delany’s work appears in the bibliography at the end of the anthology *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*).

After a montage of Delany’s published books, John Letham praises him as a rare philosophical, confessional, and artistic “genius” but notes that rather than being a monomaniac, Delany is a multifaceted intellectual (i.e. a polymath). In fact, in Taylor’s film we get the opportunity to see a short, very “hippie” film by Delany called *The Orchid* (1971).



*A Walk into the Sea: Danny Williams and the Warhol Factory.*



Perhaps too literally “deconstructing” the documentary.



*The Orchid.*



A touch of Jack Smith (who was one of Delany’s “tricks” in *Motion*).





One of many silent 8mm home movies.



*Gendernauts: A Journey Through Shifting Identities.*

Letham argues that Delany “never saw boundaries” and thus makes us question boundaries like that established between high and low art (we see Delany at a comic shop, then a modern art museum). Despite what Letham identifies as a violent “American anti-intellectual streak,” we also witness the embrace of Delany by fellow academics at a University of Buffalo critical symposium on his work. Yet Taylor’s montage of snippets of “theory speak” has the (perhaps unintended) anti-intellectual effect of making it all seem like pretentious name-dropping—“Jacobsen is primarily interested in a deconstruction of Freud,” “according to Mulvey...” Such phrases cannot help but make any academic feel the sting of recognition (indeed, the essay you are now reading is hardly immune).

## Polyvalence

In her important essay “The Evidence of Experience,” feminist historian Joan Scott uses Delany’s description of a gay bathhouse orgy in *The Motion of Light in Water* as an example of common reliance in accounts of minority identity on the presumed evidence of personal experience (even though the passage she references describes his *visual* revelation that he was part of a much larger *collective* group than the isolated 1950s image of “the homosexual”). Scott argues that such attempts to document hidden or alternative histories risk taking “difference” for granted:

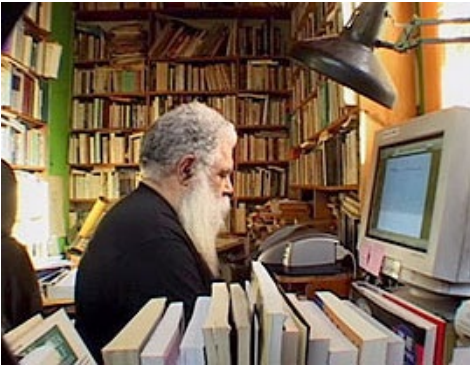
“The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (777).



In memoriam Jacques Derrida.



Derrida: "The Writer on Holiday."



Delaney: word processing.



Traumatic history.

The question, then, is whether Taylor's film also relies on the evidence of experience (by illustrating Delany's memories of his family and coming out with home movies and stock footage of Gay Liberation Front marches).

But Scott acknowledges that Delany's *Motion* encourages critical thought about identity categories, material history, desire and subjectivity (795). The dual essay structure of *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* continues this kind of critical autobiography by combining the "experiential" narrative of desire with the critical genealogy of discourse and material life (urbanism and the policing of sexuality). *The Polymath* shows Delany returning to the question of "how social change takes place," focusing on the problems of racism and homophobia. He recalls being five years old when his father told him the frightening story of the lynching of his father's light-skinned cousin and her unborn child along with her darker-skinned husband by a group of white men who must have originally assumed that she was white. Taylor accompanies this story with slow-motion images of the Ku Klux Klan from *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915).

Delany provides other instances of the prevailing discourse that says that blacks are not human beings: In 1920 when Paul Robeson obtained special dispensation to attend Columbia Law School, the other students would stomp their feet on the floor when he spoke. And in 1998 when James Byrd Jr. was dragged behind a truck until his body came apart in Jasper, Texas, interviews with the families of the murderers indicated that they were baffled and simply could not understand what their son had done,

"All he'd done is he'd killed a nigger [sic]."

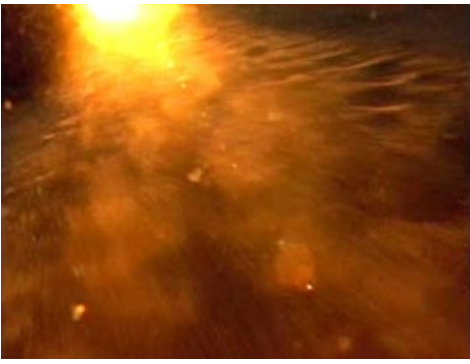
(In a rather literal-minded fashion, Taylor accompanies this with a traveling point-of-view shot of a dirt road from the back of a pickup truck.) Delany then considers:

"How do you deal with something like that? You deal with it the way you deal with any discourse you don't approve of: you live your life as if the world worked differently. In the long run that's what actually does the changing."

Likewise, Delany explains, "I live my life as a gay man and eventually people learn to deal with that," arguing that he is able to have a similar effect through his writing by making his readers "inhabit" his world for a time (at least vicariously).

Repeating parts of *The Motion of Light in Water* (perhaps inevitably), Delany admits that when he was hospitalized at 22 after a "classic nervous breakdown" (including a compulsive morbid obsession with throwing himself under a subway train), he used group therapy to talk about what it was like as a gay young man who was married (to white poet Marilyn Hacker) and trying to function as a heterosexual. But he found that the discourse he used was at odds with the way he really felt: he acted ashamed about his "problem," i.e. "being a homosexual" (a locution he now finds very pre-Stonewall). He asked himself, "Why were you so abjectly embarrassed?" since in fact he has gotten a lot out of being gay (in terms of his social contacts and worldview). While Scott might object to this belief in an experience outside the constraints of discourse, *The*





The POV of a hate crime victim.

*Polymath* also returns to a concern in *Times Square* for how discursive shifts occur: Delany is fascinated by the small rhetorical drift whereby “coming out” once referred to one’s first gay social or sexual contact (as in “coming out into” [gay] society) but came to refer to the confessional rite of “coming out” to primarily straight people (*Times* 118). This, he argues, affects how we think about and live different sexual identities (which is in the spirit of Scott’s advice to historians to reflect on the discursive construction of social differences).



“A classic nervous breakdown.”



“Chip” (a.k.a. “the Professor”).



Scintillating personality.



Reading from *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.



Delany at the podium.



The polymath.

Delany provides one more example of how social change takes place. In the 1970s he lived at the Albert Hotel along with several preoperative male-to-female transsexuals, and he originally was convinced that it must be “hardwired to want to know the gender of the person standing next to you.” But after he had been there six months, he found that he simply did not care about the gender of the people he was riding with in the elevator (Taylor accompanies this story with a doubled image of elevator door gates). Delany argues that through exposure it is possible to get used to this sort of “degenderizing,” wittily remarking,

“If you’re not going to end up in bed with the person, who gives a flying fuck?—as it were, to talk metaphorically...”

He insists, “If I can change about something like that, then anyone can change,” and indicates that he attempted such a degenderizing of his characters in his novel *Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand*. Monika Treut’s documentary



The Albert Hotel lesson in “degenderizing.”

*Gendernauts* (1999) has a similarly refreshing “posttranssexual” take on gender thanks in part to her “guide” to queer San Francisco, Sandy Stone.



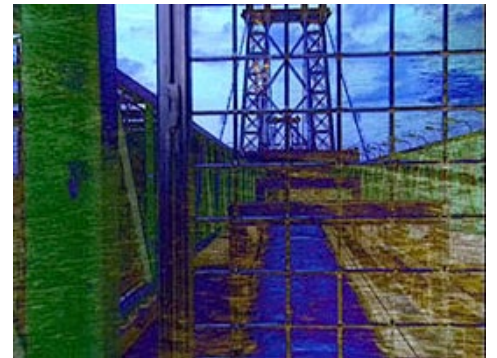
Bridges suggest transition.



Delany transcribed the reality of decaying cities into his novels.



Water suggests the flow of time.



Polychromatic bridge imagery overlaid with rippling water.

We could perhaps learn all this from Delany’s published books, but Taylor’s directorial hand can be seen most clearly in the imagery he inserts to illustrate Delany’s most lyrical points about the significance of recurring images (in his books and life) of bridges, decaying cities, and, of course, “the motion of light in water.” Many of Taylor’s gorgeous images of water and bridges are polychromatic (tinted by colorist Milan Boncich), double-exposed, and otherwise rendered in abstract compositions that resemble Nigel Grierson’s photography for “23 envelope,” or the sculptor Richard Serra’s abstract film *Railroad Turnbridge* (1976).

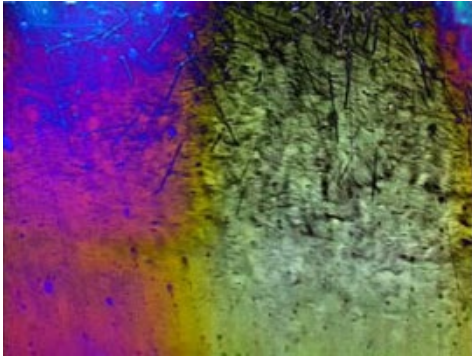
The inverted-color double-exposure technique is used to great effect in shots of Delany in profile reading a particularly inspiring passage from *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*, superimposed over slow-motion tracking shots of porn theater marquees:



Bridge girder aesthetics.

"Were the porn theaters romantic? Not at all. But because of the people who used them, they were humane and functional, fulfilling





A tinted abstract composition (inside a carwash).



[23 envelope postcard](#) posted online.  
[click on link]



Richard Serra's *Railroad Turnbridge*.

needs that most of our society does not yet know how to acknowledge. The easy argument already in place to catch up these anecdotes is that social institutions such the porn movies take up, then, a certain social excess—are even, perhaps, socially beneficial to some small part of it (a margin outside the margin). But that is the same argument that allows them to be dismissed—and physically smashed and flattened: They are relevant only to the margin. No one else cares. Well, in a democracy, that is not an acceptable argument. People are not excess. It is the same argument that dismisses the needs of blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Asians, women, gays, the homeless, the poor, the worker—and all other margins that, taken together (people like you, people like me), are the country's overwhelming majority: those who, socioeconomically, are simply less powerful." (90)

Judith Halberstam calls *Times Square*,

"One of the best studies of sexual space that does still focus on gay men, but recognizes the fault lines of class, race, and gender in the constructions of sexual communities" (13).

But after her approving summary of the work, she returns to her misgivings ("still"):

"Women are tellingly absent from Delany's smart, engaging, and even revolutionary account of sexual subcultures, and one is led to conclude by the end of the book that as of now, there is no role for women in this subterranean world of public sex. While it is not my project here to discuss the possibilities for women to develop venues for public sex, I do want to address the absence of gender as a category of analysis in much of the work on sexuality and space ..." (15)

Halberstam here acknowledges the importance of Delany's book, but in some ways sets it up as evidence of the urban bias of queer studies that her own *In a Queer Time and Place* seeks to challenge—by shifting from global to local, urban to rural. Yet what bothers me in her feminist objection to Delany's presumed androcentrism is the *knowing* use of the word "tellingly." (For more on this issue, see *Pride Divide* [Poirier, 1997].) Spared having the onus put on her to discuss the possibilities for women's public sex venues—because it is not her project, she oversimplifies the alleged "absence" of gender as a category of analysis in work like Delany's, and specifically in his book. As Halberstam knows, male and masculine are categories of gender in need of analysis, but if by gender she means women, Delany does seriously consider whether women might enjoy such venues:

"What waits is for enough women [—gay, straight, or bi—] to consider such venues as a locus of possible pleasure. I felt that way twenty years ago. Nothing I've heard from the reports in two decades of women's bars and lesbian nights at male leather bars and the reports of men and women from heterosexual sex clubs has made me suspect that I am wrong" (32; see also 25–32; 160–61; 196–98).

In fact, Delany's work is admirable precisely because it avoids the potential sexism and misogyny of other gay male discussions of the advantages of gay promiscuity in contrast to the supposed romantic delusions of heterosexual women, or to "lesbian bed death." Take for example Daniel Harris's chapter on "Fucking" from *A Memoir of No One in Particular* (another reflexive memoir in the manner of *The Motion of Light in Water*, and Roland Barthes by Roland



Porn marquee: "Sexual Heights."

Barthes):

"Heterosexuals often criticize gay men for severing sex and intimacy (an association that is, after all, very recent in human evolution), but when I consider the number of frustrated straight women whose lives have been derailed by quixotic fantasies about knights in shining armor, I am more than ever convinced of the psychological advantages of promiscuity for inuring oneself to the unimportance of sex."(99)

Harris may even believe he is making a feminist point here—about how women's lives should not be derailed by the ideology of romance—so perhaps the operative division is between gay and straight:

"The sex lives of gay men are both enhanced and complicated by the fact that we are the ultimate consumerists of sex, of the disposable fuck. It is not a psychological impediment in gay men that prevents some of us from combining sex and intimacy but a dearth of opportunities among heterosexuals that makes them insist that intercourse should occur only within the context of emotional commitment, a point of view that grows out of deprivation ..." (101)

Delany likewise discusses "artificial" heterosexual scarcity and what might be done to remedy it:

"Gay urban society early on learned how to overcome the sexual scarcity problem, in a population field where, if anything, scarcity could easily be even greater. Suppose heterosexual society took a lesson from gay society and addressed the problem not through antisex superstructural modifications but through pro-sex infrastructural change." (196)

He proposes the creation of public sex institutions set up for women: hostels throughout the city catering to women where they could bring their sexual partners for a brief tryst, wherein it was clear that

"all decisions were women's call, with everything designed for women's comfort and convenience" (197).

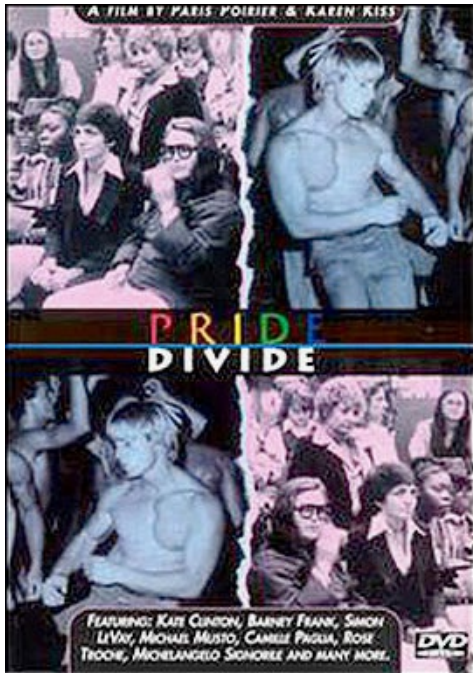
Thus the advantage of Delany's discussion of the problem of heterosexual scarcity and monogamy is that he does not dump the emotional baggage on women alone—probably because he lived in a polyamorous, relatively functional "open marriage" with Hacker, and shared her feminist convictions.

[Go to page 2](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



Pride Divide—sibling rivalry?



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Polymorphous perversity

In *The Polymath*, Delany frankly states,

“I think that heterosexual monogamy is a really vicious and silly way to live.”

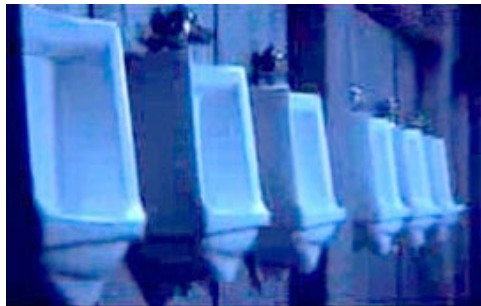
Since he has seen so many made miserable by it, he does not therefore “agree with it.” But he compares it to a religious choice, and thus he respects it the way one must have respect for other religions. By contrast, Delany explains in both *The Polymath* and *Times Square* that his ideal sex life involves

“a single person in my life as a sexual focus, at the same time a general population of encounters with different men (of the sort I’ve been describing here), along with a healthy masturbatory life. But what made that a feasible way to live between 1975 and 1995 were institutions such as the sex movies” (83).

He informs us that he actually does quite well for himself even in his sixties, since there seems to be a sizable number of younger men who are attracted to men with white beards (in the film we see a young African-American woman greeting Delany on the street with “Hey Santa!”). He also jokingly makes a double-entendre linking alimentary and sexual taste: as the “kinkier” black sheep of his family, he always “ate whatever was put in front of me” and seems to be pretty “well padded out” as a result. This analogy was also made by George Michael, who justified his “lewd behavior” when he was the victim of a sting operation in a Beverly Hills public park toilet by saying that he has “never been able to turn down a free meal.” (His video for “Outside” is a brilliant response to the whole scandal, and its satire of vice police panopticism is as refreshing as the work of Delany, Gayle Rubin, and Pat Califia. The scandal and “knowingness” surrounding Senator Craig’s recent Minneapolis airport restroom incident is proof of our collective amnesia [cf. Kim, “Brokeback GOP”].)



“Hey Santa!”



The music video for George Michael's “Outside.”



A public toilet...



... becomes a disco.

Clearly, this is where we see the “Opinions” part of the film’s alternate title (itself borrowed from *Tristram Shandy*). But perhaps this risks becoming too much of a gay versus straight polemic.

In an interview “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” Michel Foucault attempts to



Like a funny version of John Greyson's *Urinal* (1988).

historicize gay male promiscuity, arguing that it has to do with the sexual freedom which men in general are allowed (prostitution, bathhouses, etc.), which means that opportunities for sexual encounters are enormous, and ironically

“by a curious twist often typical of such strategies—it actually reversed the standards in such a way that homosexuals came to enjoy even more freedom in their physical relations than heterosexuals” (326–27).

But Foucault insists that this is not a natural condition of homosexuality (a biological given), but is rather an artifact of history (327).



A typical porn theater.

Following the interviewer's prompt, Foucault argues that the “erotic imagination” and literature of homosexuality are likewise different from that of heterosexuals. In the case of heterosexuality, a great emphasis is placed on courtship, which is highly evolved and coded, and the persuasion involved in getting the beloved to surrender. By contrast, in the case of the homosexual “trick,” sex is given at the outset, so there is an elaboration of the sexual act itself (both its description and its practice), which is especially “coded” in the case of SM practices (330–31). Foucault notes that this was not always the case: for the ancient Greeks, homosexual courtship was central, and the problem of a male submitting to another was very important. But in contemporary homosexual experience, the act itself is easy to come by and so other things than the “lead up” to sex get eroticized. In contrast to Casanova's famous expression, “The best moment of love is when one is climbing the stairs,” Foucault proposes, “For a homosexual, the best moment of love is likely to be when the lover leaves in the taxi” (330). He suggests,

“This is why the great homosexual writers of our culture (Cocteau, Genet, Burroughs) can write so elegantly about the sexual act itself, because the homosexual imagination is for the most part concerned with reminiscing about the act rather than anticipating it. And, as I said earlier, this is all due to very concrete and practical considerations and says nothing about the intrinsic nature of homosexuality.” (330)

Delany's own sexual reminiscences in *Motion* and *Times Square* provide excellent examples of the elaboration of highly codified sexual encounters. And while they fit Foucault's schema above, Delany often insists that he does not want seem nostalgic (*Times* 16; 146–47; 166; *Motion* 294; de Villiers, “Leaving the Cinema”).

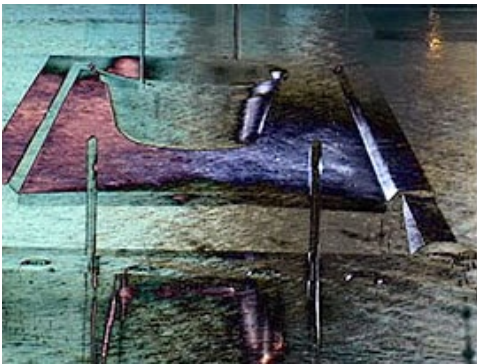
Foucault suggests that gay sex acts are not really what disturb people, but that gay people might develop satisfying and different types of relationships other than those that have been institutionalized (332). This is an important reminder during the endless gay marriage debates, but in fact Delany's works both attest to such possibilities and insist that the problem is the demolition of “institutions” that facilitated satisfying cross-class, cross-race, and cross-sexual relations such as the Times Square porn theaters. In *The Polymath*, Delany explains that he likes cities because of their diversity and believes that it is *essential to talk to strangers*.

Foucault's interview and Delany's books might also be productively compared to Barthes's preface to Renaud Camus' gay cruising novel *Tricks*. Barthes claims



“Tearrooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet.”

that in *Tricks*, the “social scene” and the act of cruising become more interesting than “banal” sexual practices: the alert, conversation, the other person first as a “type” (“That’s just my type”), finally emerging as a distinct “person,” which either increases or decreases desire (294). Barthes argues that each *Trick* is therefore unique and *in-imitable*: each person is revealed “lightly” (without psychologizing) in their clothing, accent, and setting (294). The character sketches in Delany’s *Times Square* follow precisely this pattern. But Barthes notes that this is a “*virtual* love” (294), because it is stopped short on each side *by contract* (something which is in the end far better than the obligatory heterosexual, “I’ll call you”). We could indeed ask: Is there a heterosexual equivalent to this? Why or why not? (How is gender involved? Within patriarchy, a promiscuous man is called a “stud,” whereas a woman who enjoys sex is a “slut” or a “freak”).



Clinical imagery during his discussion of AIDS.

But Barthes then asks: Does the repetition in *Tricks* mean that it is a sad or failed quest? No, because each “trick” is presided over by a feeling of happiness and “Good Will” which is usually quite foreign to amorous relations (294). There is actually a very subtle *ethics* at work here, which is what a disapproving condemnation of homosexual promiscuity (not necessarily *unsafe promiscuity*) often seems to miss entirely. Delany’s *Times Square* is equally concerned with the ethics of public sex, and when he speaks about the porn theaters as “humane” spaces, he echoes Barthes’s description of “tricking” as hospitable, generous, and considerate. *The Polymath* begins with Delany explaining how after he was married in 1961, daily encounters with a dozen or so men in various public restrooms made his working day bearable. He does not think he ever could have written and published five novels between the ages of 19 and 23 “without the sexual generosity of the city” around him because the sex made the work bearable. He explains that this was pre-AIDS, but in the AIDS era, when *Time Magazine* starting talking about gay men “living life in the fast lane” with three hundred contacts a year, he figured out that he must have two- to three thousand contacts a year. He remarks,

“I don’t think people have a good idea of the sexual landscape they themselves are negotiating as they walk down the street.”



An archaeology of medical perception.

Of course, in the film Delany acknowledges that his position is controversial, and does not suggest that anyone follow his example (he is HIV negative and rarely uses a condom, but anal sex is not part of his sexual repertoire). A more extended discussion of gay men’s ambivalence or resistance toward “safe sex” discourse can be found in Michael Warner’s book *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Yet Delany also argues that the tests that need to be done on HIV transmission risks have not been done properly, and he calls the prevailing atmosphere of misinformation genocidal. This attitude is not necessarily “politically correct,” [1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] but it dovetails with the concerns of another recent documentary, *Gay Sex in the 70s*.



## Polyphasic

Here I would like to connect *The Polymath* to a larger group of documentaries and videos that discuss comparable issues: *Gay Sex in the 70s*, *Fenced Out*, and *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston, 1990). They each share a similar focus on queer historiography, especially of the various phases of (and threats to) New York City's queer urban life.



Sexual space: trucks.

*Gay Sex in the 70s* features interviews with (primarily white) men who fondly recall public sex in the trucks off the Henry Hudson Parkway and the crumbling Christopher Street pier. The rather wistful talking-heads style interviews are illustrated with period photographs, street footage, and vintage pornography (all set to a disco soundtrack, obviously). The film covers the period between the Stonewall riots (late June 1969) and the AIDS crisis, but unlike *And the Band Played On* (Spottiswoode, 1993), it crucially avoids the conclusion that the sexual revolution and freedom enjoyed by these men were directly responsible for the AIDS crisis. In fact it demonstrates that the kind of social collectivity represented by the baths was crucial for early AIDS activism and safe sex information outreach (Bronski). Delany also insists on this point after his description of sex in the trucks and baths in *Motion* (294).

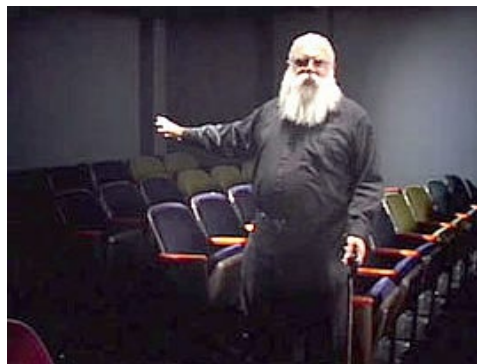
*The Polymath* shares another approach with *Gay Sex in the 70s*, namely the use of “guides” who recall in detail *how* exactly gay sexual spaces (baths, piers, trucks, theaters) were used. In a fascinating scene in *The Polymath*, Delany is filmed in a theater explaining what would go on in each row of a typical porn movie theater, starting at the back row, discussing the lighting, moving to the front, discussing the sexual acts performed, the etiquette of joining someone in a row, and the important guardian role of the queens gossiping in the back. This is an attempt to account for what de Certeau identified as “spatial practices”:

“these multiform, resistan[t], tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised, and which should lead us to a theory of everyday practices, of lived space, of the disquieting familiarity of the city” (96).

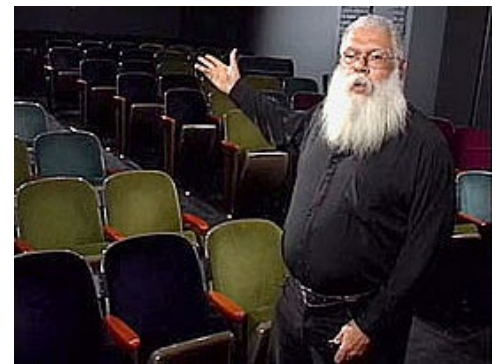
In fact, Delany insists that far from being chaotic and anarchic, public sex is a highly choreographed and rule-governed social activity.



Sexual space: porn theaters.



Lighting and layout.



Delany as our helpful, knowledgeable guide.

*The Polymath* and *Gay Sex in the 70s* are attempts to combat historical amnesia, especially the social and spatial amnesia brought about by AIDS and





*Fenced Out.*



*"In the life" on the Christopher Street pier.*

"redevelopment" projects. Delany does not "buy" any of the arguments about why the sexual landscape of New York City has been transformed: "family values," "AIDS-prevention," "love of theater," "safety of women" (161). He argues that in demolishing the existing life of the Times Square area, corporations and investors have actually *promoted* crime, violence, drugs, and have shown a lack of respect or consideration for poor women (and prostitutes) in the interest of marketing to a wealthier group of women. A similar attempt to combat amnesia can be found in the short activist youth-produced documentary video *Fenced Out*.

*Fenced Out* features interviews with "Stonewall veterans" and young people about the Hudson River Park Trust's attempt to fence out the poor and homeless gay and transgender youth of color who view the Christopher Street pier as the one place where they can go to feel comfortable and associate with those "in the life."

In *Fenced Out*, a young woman's voice reads aloud from the official version in a heavily ironic tone:

"Under the leadership of Governor Pataki and Mayor Giuliani, five miles of the riverfront from Battery Park to 59th Street is under construction to become Hudson River Park. It's going to be transformed into a 'green and blue oasis' for all of New York to enjoy."

Another voice interjects, "Except for us, of course!" ("O.K.?!" another can be heard chiming in.) Several interviewees explain how law enforcement have gotten out of hand with their harassment of youth accused of loitering and lowering the property value of area residents. When the girl who started the documentary was arrested on the piers and asked the officer why, he replied,

"No offence to you, but these people don't want you here anymore, and they pay our jobs, so we have to do what they want us to do."

We then see a police officer condescendingly explaining the same point before he points to the camera and asks for it to be turned off (always a privileged moment of truth in documentaries). But in an interview with June Brown and Daris Jackson, it is clear that they will not stand for police telling them to "Shut up" and "Walk!" responding with the activist chant, "Whose streets? Our streets!"

Brown explains,



Hudson River Park Trust.

“The pier was a lot of good memories, a lot of broken memories, a lot of people died on the pier, a lot of people died *for* the pier. I think not only will it be bad for the future generations, but it will be disrespectful of the past generations to close down the pier.”

In his book *No Future*, Lee Edelman argues that invocations of future generations are almost always self-defeating for queers, but here Brown’s acknowledgement of past generations points to a refusal of the kind of infringement of civil liberties usually carried out in the name of innocent children. *Fenced Out* shows the youths interviewing older gay men and women about Stonewall and the Christopher Street pier. Bob Kohler explains that the Gay Liberation Front declared Christopher Street the gay street and

“that’s why you hear the cry today at demonstrations ‘Whose streets? Our streets!’ That came out of those days.”

Like the men interviewed in *Gay Sex in the 70s*, Kohler explains in *Fenced Out* how the crumbling piers were

“very unsafe, they were packed with people, walking up on girders, walking around naked or just having sex right in front of you.”

Ajamu Sankofa (N.Y.C. Police Watch) explains,

“People would hang out there nude almost, with food, fun, no police, it was as if we had taken that place over, and it’s sad to see years later coming back to it, it’s not the same place.”

One of video’s organizers, Corrina Wiggins, explains to Regina Shavers (Griot Circle):

“By doing this project, we went back and into like, the piers from like the 60s and the 70s and ... we noticed that like the piers was mainly white gay males, and that led us to believe, like, we started asking questions: Where are the women? Where are all the women of color and the men of color?”

Shavers responds, “What I know about the piers, is absolutely nothing.” Wiggins then asks, “Were there many public spaces for lesbian women of color?” to which Shavers responds with laughter,

“Now I know that’s a joke, right? ... I never grew up feeling I was entitled or had a right to have any space, or a right to exist. If when I was 15 or 16 they had put up barriers I would have just gone along with it because that’s how I was conditioned ... it’s not like how it is now, we didn’t have no gay churches, no lesbian and gay center, no newspapers, no people fighting for lesbian and gay rights, we didn’t even have *civil* rights.”

Joan Nestle, of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, is also interviewed, seconding Shavers’s point about potential violence against lesbian women:

“We lived with violence, but we *lived*.”

Like Ann Cvetkovich’s recent work on gay and lesbian archives, *An Archive of Feelings*, and Halberstam’s “Brandon Archive” (about Brandon Teena), such archiving marks an attempt to combat the oblitative homophobia and



A privileged moment of documentary truth: “Turn that off.”



DESTROYER.





A crowd sunning themselves on the pier.

transphobia of official history, and the harmful effects of historical amnesia (made all the more urgent faced with AIDS and violence against transgender people). But documentary cinema is also clearly a means of *anamnesis*, a way of un-forgetting, “unlosing” (Halberstam 47), and archiving queer history, social tactics, and spatial practices (Payne).

We can also see hints of this in Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris Is Burning*, during the 1989 epilogue when Willi Ninja (Mother of the House of Ninja) explains that people complain that the Harlem drag balls are not what they once were. He says,

“I really do miss the street element. I mean, but everything changes, and everything’s been changing drastically, you know—New York’s not even the same.”

Willi Ninja also makes an appearance in *Fenced Out*, and he and Malkia Cyril each explain the importance of voguing contests on the pier. In the video, Cyril makes a powerful argument that echoes the moral thrust of Delany’s above-quoted speech in *The Polymath*:

“All displacement is, is moving people from one part of the city to another part of the city, it’s not like they disappear. If they move from here the only place they’re moving to is the jail.”

Over shots of a crowd dispersing, a voice-over makes a similar point:

“Now they kick us off the pier at one o’clock and like they come along with little cars and like ‘Get off the pier’—and their whole issue is we’re on the streets, we’re on *their* streets and we’re lowering their property value because we’re in front of their building, and if they kick us off the pier, where we gonna go? On the street.”

As Delany insists, viewing these people as marginal “excess” is not acceptable in a democracy. Another major activist “veteran” in *Fenced Out*, Sylvia Rivera (of Street Transgender Activist Revolutionaries), remembers how

“all these piers were old piers and white middle-class men were having sex all hours of the day and night, this was their playground, Christopher Street was their playground. They had white male hustlers on Christopher Street. So for them to turn the tides around on the people of color and the trans community now in the year 2001, 32 years after the Stonewall, I find it completely unacceptable.”

The “them” here implicitly refers to white middle-class (gay) men as the current agents of oppression in the name of property values. But while there is certainly some truth in this account (the negative side of enthusiasm for “gayborhoods”: see Nero, “Why Are the Gay Ghettos White?”), the experiences of Delany, Sankofa, and one African-American survivor in *Gay Sex in the 70s* contradict this sweeping characterization of the early Christopher Street pier as white and middle class.

*Fenced Out* performs important cultural work by desegregating and connecting



Photo of the crumbling old pier in *Fenced Out* (*Gay Sex in the 70s* is also replete with such photos).



Another strangely beautiful image of precarious girders.



Regina Shavers laughing at the question "Were there many public spaces for lesbian women of color?"

queer generations, working against what Eve Sedgwick has identified as the

"systematic separation of children from queer adults; their systematic sequestration from the truth about the lives, culture, and sustaining relations of adults they know who may be queer" (2).

The emphasis on timely, youth-produced videos is obviously salutary (the typography and music instantly date the video, but this must mean that it appealed to its contemporaries). However, the division of the credits between "featured youth" and "featured adults" may unfortunately reinforce a youth/adult binary that is not terribly useful for queer lives. Halberstam, for one, is critical of social service outreach programs for queer youth that

"make a sharp division between youth and adult, and often set up the two groups as antagonists. I would also claim that the new emphasis on queer youth, can unwittingly contribute to an erasure of queer history" (176).

But clearly, *Fenced Out* is not guilty of such an erasure, in that it seeks to honor the past history of decades of queer activism. Like Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," the video manages to avoid the error of

"assigning the working-class the role of the savior of *future* generations [thereby severing] the sinews of its greatest power. Through this schooling the class forgot its hate as much as its spirit of sacrifice. For both nourish themselves on the picture of enslaved forebears, not on the ideal of the emancipated heirs" (Thesis XII).

*Fenced Out* and *The Polymath* attempt to represent a social space that is under siege by police who act in the interests of the ruling class. Clyde Taylor has described "New U.S. Black Cinema" in terms that are immensely helpful for thinking about this social space:

"Indigenous Afro-American films project onto a social space ... It is a space carrying a commitment, in echoes and connotations, to the particular social experience of Afro-American people. It establishes only the slightest, if any, departure from the contiguous offscreen reality" (233).

Taylor offers Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1976) as an example of the struggle to make independent black cinema, including run-ins with the police in the Watts section of Los Angeles (like that between the New York police and the girl who initiated *Fenced Out*). Taylor argues that the

"social space of many new black films is saturated with contingency. Simply, it is the contingency of on-location shooting. But what a location. It is a space in which invasion is imminent. A street scene in these films is a place where anything can happen, any bizarre or brutal picaresque eventuality" (234).

While it is hardly neorealist, *The Polymath* nonetheless attempts to portray this contingent social space, and Delany emphasizes that this space carries with it a commitment. We can hear the urgency in Delany's defense of queer inter-class interracial social institutions, even though *The Polymath* does not make use of the "direct address" style of *Fenced Out*, which has lines such as this:



"New York's not even the same."  
(*Paris Is Burning*).



Willie Ninja (Mother of the House of Ninja) in *Fenced Out*.





The epilogue of *Paris Is Burning*.

“Do you chill at the pier? Do you like being able to come to the only queer youth hang out area in the city? Well guess what... the pier is already fenced off and soon the pier, as we know it, will be gone.”

## Polysemy

*Fenced Out* uses Madonna’s nostalgic ballad “This Used To Be My Playground” (ironic given Sylvia Rivera’s accusation), but in *The Polymath*, Delany is not content to relegate his experience of the satisfying “sexual generosity of the city” to a nostalgic past realm. Delany insists,

“It is not nostalgia to ask ... How did what was there inform the quality of life for the rest of the city? How will what is there now inform that quality of life?” (*Times* 147).

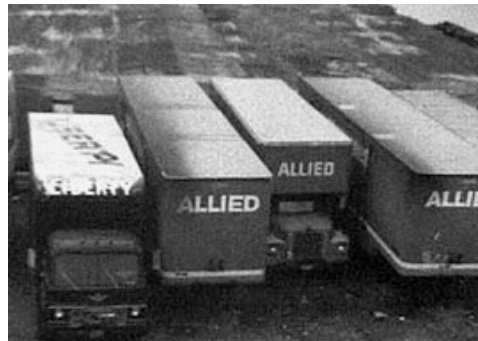
Unfortunately, this expression has been appropriated to act as a smokescreen for ruthless demolition and capitalist construction agendas. In *Fenced Out* Emanuel Xavier says,

“I think it was a lot more welcoming before the whole Giuliani era and the whole ‘quality of life.’”

Like the young gay men interviewed about their image of the “hedonistic” 1970s during the closing credits of *Gay Sex in the 70s*, the past confronts the present with this real question of “quality of life.” Documentary cinema can serve as a technology of cultural memory, bringing about this confrontational effect of challenging the present. My hope has been to place Taylor’s film within a larger set of documentaries and texts that make for “good company,” demonstrating its affinity less with the recent spate of biographical intellectual profiles, and more with the “engaged” depiction of queer of color social spaces.



The end of *Fenced Out*.



The Henry Hudson Parkway trucks seem like christened ships: “Allied,” “Liberty.”



Reason Clothing’s snarky “GO <3 YOUR OWN CITY” shirts.

[Go to Notes page](#)

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

[1] I am hesitant to use the expression “politically correct,” but feel it is closer to the original sense (from radical feminist debates regarding what kind of sex is “politically correct”) than the more recent backlashes against feminism, multiculturalism, and gay and lesbian studies. Chuck Kleinhans has suggested to me that this controversial aspect of *The Polymath* might explain its reception:

“It played successfully at the last Tribeca film festival, where it premiered, but it has not had further distribution or exhibition, even at gay film festivals, probably because it is a very sympathetic presentation of Delany and his views, which are fairly ‘politically incorrect’ on matters of unprotected, casual, anonymous, and public sex” (personal correspondence, 1 January 2008).

(Fortunately, it has since screened at gay film festivals in San Francisco and London.) The Tribeca Film Festival paired *The Polymath* with the documentary *On the Downlow* (Child, 2007), perhaps suggesting that both documentaries explore complex and politically incorrect topics within African-American and gay communities (despite the politically correct name of the festival program, “Coming Out”). I would like to thank Fred Barney Taylor for sending me a promotional copy of *The Polymath* for this review. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

### Works cited

Barthes, Roland. “Preface to Renaud Camus’s *Tricks*.” *The Rustle of Language*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989. 291–95.

Barthes, Roland. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Farrar, 1977.

Benjamin, Walter. “On the Concept of History.” Trans. Dennis Redmond. 4 August 2001.  
<http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ThesesonHistory.html>

Bronski, Michael. “Randy Shilts: Conduct Unbecoming?” Gay and Lesbian Community Notes Column. May 1994.

Cvetkovich, Anne. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.

Cvetkovich, Ann. "The Powers of Seeing and Being Seen: *Truth or Dare* and *Paris Is Burning*." *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. Ed. Collins, Radner & Collins. New York: Routledge, 1993. 155–69.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.

de Villiers, Nicholas. "Leaving the Cinema: Metacinematic Cruising in Tsai Ming-Liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*." *Jump Cut* 50. Spring 2008.  
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/DragonInn/index.html>

Delany, Samuel R. *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004 (1988).

Delany, Samuel R. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. New York: NYU P, 1999.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.

Edelman, Lee. "Tearooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Abelove et al. New York: Routledge, 1993. 553–74.

Foucault, Michel. "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act." *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996. 322–34.

"George Michael English Archive 1998":  
<http://www.george.michael.szm.sk/Esection/Earchiv98.html>

Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: NYU P, 2005.

Harris, Daniel. *A Memoir of No One in Particular*. New York: Basic, 2002.

Hemphill, Essex, ed. *Brother To Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 1991.

Kim, Richard. "Brokeback GOP." Blog. *The Nation*. 27 August 2007.  
<http://www.thenation.com/blogs/notion?pid=227318>

Morris, Gary. "Mondo Tranny: Monika Treut's *Gendernauts*." *Bright Lights Film Journal* 34. October 2001.  
<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/34/gendernauts.html>

Muñoz, José Esteban. "Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories." *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*. Ed. Strange Bedfellows. Boston: South End Press, 1996. 355–72.

Nero, Charles I. "Why Are the Gay Ghettos White?" *Black Queer Studies*. Ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 228–245.

Payne, Robert. "Gay scene, queer grid." Conference paper presented at *Queer Space: Centres and Peripheries*. University of Technology Sydney. 20–21 February 2007. Online conference proceedings:  
[http://www.dab.uts.edu.au/conferences/queer\\_space/proceedings/online\\_payne.pdf](http://www.dab.uts.edu.au/conferences/queer_space/proceedings/online_payne.pdf)

Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1992. 3–44.

Ryan, Joelle Ruby. "Whose Streets? Our Streets!: Trans Bodies as Agents of Revolutionary Change." Conference paper presented at *Battleground States: The Body and Culture*. Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio. February 2008.

Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (Summer 1991): 773–97.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Queer and Now." *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993. 1–20.

Taylor, Clyde. "New U.S. Black Cinema." *Movies and Mass Culture*. Ed. John Belton. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1996. 231–46.

Tribeca Film Festival program notes for *The Polymath* and *On the Downlow*.

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000.

## Films cited

*And the Band Played On*. Dir. Roger Spottiswoode. Writ. Randy Shilts & Arnold Schulman. HBO, 1993.

*A Walk into the Sea: Danny Williams and the Warhol Factory*. Dir. Esther Robinson. Arthouse, 2007.

*Bush Mama*. Dir. Haile Gerima. Tricontinental, 1976.

*Derrida*. Dir. Kirby Dick & Amy Ziering Kofman. Zeitgeist, 2002.

*Fenced Out*. Paper Tiger Television/New Neutral Zone/FIERCE, 2001.

*Gay Sex in the 70s*. Dir. Joseph F. Lovett. Wolfe Video, 2005.

*Gay Sex in the 70s* (trailer). YouTube:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8Rfq\\_dBmC4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8Rfq_dBmC4)

*Gendernauts: A Journey Through Shifting Identities* (*Gendernauts—Eine Reise durch die Geschlechter*). Dir. Monika Treut. First Run, 1999.

"Outside." Music video. Perf. George Michael. YouTube:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSqI3ve\\_rgY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSqI3ve_rgY)



*Paris Is Burning*. Dir. Jennie Livingston. Off White Productions, 1990.

*Pride Divide*. Dir. Paris Poirier. Filmmakers Library, 1997.

*Railroad Turnbridge*. Dir. Richard Serra. 1976.

*The Birth of a Nation*. Dir. D.W. Griffith. Epoch, 1915. (Kino Video, 2002.)

*The Cruise*. Dir. Bennett Miller. Artisan, 1998.

*The Polymath, or, The Life and Opinions of Samuel R. Delany, Gentleman*.  
Dir. Fred Barney Taylor. MaestroMedia, 2007.

“This Used To Be My Playground.” Music video. Perf. Madonna. YouTube  
[taken off due to copyright claim]

*Urinal (Pissior)*. Dir. John Greyson. Frameline, 1988.

*Zizek*. Dir. Astra Taylor. Zeitgeist, 2005.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *The Girl Next Door*



The opening credits of *The Girl Next Door*; backstage during a shoot.



Valentine discusses her reasons for becoming a porn actress, her proficiency as a porn actress and her sexual capabilities: "I'm really good at sex. I'm very confident in my sexual capabilities."

## Documentary investigations and the female porn star

by [Belinda Smail](#)

Since the mid-nineties, documentary filmmakers have become increasingly interested in exploring the world of pornography. This subject matter represents one of the most marketable trends in contemporary documentary, particularly in terms of DVD distribution. These documentaries frequently have an argumentative logic as they investigate pornography's culture and production, creating a "behind the scenes" exposé of the industry and the individuals who work in it. Perhaps more than any other media form, pornography is shaped by and attracts a great deal of strong feeling. A documentary about the pornography industry, or what I term here the *pornography documentary*, similarly draws upon a range of emotional responses, and I argue that a number of these emotions cohere around the figure of the female porn star. Here I look in particular at three such documentaries: *Sex: The Annabelle Chong Story* (2000), *The Girl Next Door* (2000) and *Inside Deep Throat* (2004).

In their discussion of pornography and ethnography, Christian Hansen, Catherine Needham and Bill Nichols argue,

"Both pornography and ethnography promise something they cannot deliver: the ultimate pleasure of knowing the Other. On this promise of cultural or sexual knowledge they depend, but they are also condemned to do nothing more than make it available for representation" (225).

In other words, as viewers we desire pleasure but will never be pleased entirely (in pornography we extract pleasure but this is never the pleasure that is represented). Similarly, we desire to know but cannot fully appropriate the knowledge that is represented (the knowledge of the cultural other in the case of ethnography). Hansen, Needham and Nichols' formulation is instructive for a number of reasons. These documentaries contain a representation of women that appeals to the viewer's desire for knowledge about the other. And this desire is based in pre-existing spectatorial expectations shaped by the aesthetic qualities of documentary and pornography. Yet the pornography documentary emerges at an historical moment when female subjectivity and desire is itself a site of particular fascination and struggle. If these films are organized around the pleasure of knowing the other, and thus engage a narrative desire that works at the intersection of pornography and documentary, how is (heterosexual) female desire, or the female as desiring subject, positioned in the films?



In considering the larger issue of women's fantasy and film, Claire Johnston writes early in second wave feminism,

“In order to counter objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women’s cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film” (31).

Valentine’s wedding photo from Oklahoma, where she said she had an unhappy life compared to the present with her success as a porn star.



During an outdoor shoot for a film. Sexual activity and penetration is inferred but never explicitly shown in the frame in *The Girl Next Door*.



Getting ready before a shoot in *The Girl Next Door*.

The problem of desire and female subjectivity in film has occupied scholars for some time, yet the terms of this problem have shifted greatly from the 1970s when Johnston was writing. The quest to release collective female fantasies has become complicated by the proliferation of sexual discourses in the contemporary media sphere, and many of these discourses attempt to articulate or explicate female desire. The sphere of popular culture in which pornography documentaries circulate is one that has seen *mainstream* representations, often fictional, explore what “female sexual agency” might mean, most notably in the much discussed examples of *Sex and the City* or *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. This sphere has emphasized female desire and pleasure, yet not necessarily on the terms second wave feminism might intend. Beyond the mainstream other examples have contributed to this revision of sexual agency, including the fiction filmmaking of Jane Campion or Catherine Breillait and the figures of Susie Bright and “post-porn Goddess” Annie Sprinkle.

My question of how female desire is evidenced in different texts stems from my broader interest in locating documentary within an economy of the emotions. For some time documentary scholars have sought to account for the spectatorial experience of pleasure and desire offered by documentary and how this sets it apart from narrative fiction film.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) I wish to add to these discussions and think through pleasure and desire not only as theoretical constructs but also as embodied emotions and social discourse. In this essay my focus is on the emotions, both agreeable and aversive, that frequently shape the meaning of female corporeality and sexuality. These emotions find a particular focus in the pornography documentary.

I seek to locate the pornography documentary within a terrain that encompasses genre concerns and histories of signification, as well as feminist approaches to representation and sexual politics. More specifically, my discussion focuses in on the figure of the female porn star and how she is produced at the intersection of popular feminism, narratives of female agency, and historically-shaped genre conventions that seek to organize desire. In this sense, my discussion is limited to the problem of how female agency and desire is produced in the pornography documentary text through genre conventions and popular discourse. Questions that pertain to the female viewer and her desiring relation to pornography and the female porn star are significant yet beyond this essay's scope.

## Pornography and non-fiction histories





A surgeon performs liposuction on Valentine's buttocks and stomach, perhaps the only image of penetration in the documentary. The scene highlights the malleability of bodily boundaries.



Lines are made on Valentine's body with a pen to indicate where the surgeon will remove fat. Here the bodily border, the skin, is transformed into an object and, thus, becomes abject.

Early cinematic preoccupations indicate an important convergence of the pre-history of both documentary cinema and moving image pornography. Considering these helps elucidate formations pertaining to the female body. Theorizations of early cinema and other, even earlier forms of visual culture in the latter decades of the nineteenth century suggest that these pre-histories are constituted through a single apparatus of vision that ordered the relations between pleasure, the body and cinematic technology. Considering this convergence, Tom Gunning draws on the writings of Sergei Eisenstein to describe early cinema[2] as a “cinema of attractions,” that is, a mode of visibility that emphasized a fascination with display, rather than a storytelling function that would later govern classical cinema. Early cinema's actuality films included travel film, topicals (short films depicting current events), re-enactments, and scenes of everyday life. And these films emphasized the pleasures of vision and the illusion of life represented on the screen in a way that pre-figures the documentary proper. Yet, in a manner that sits uncomfortably with Grierson's documentary project of social betterment, actuality films and a cinema of the attractions adhered to, for Gunning, a metapsychology emerging from a “lust of the eye.” Gunning identifies an aesthetic of attractions that encompasses the pleasure in looking at novelty, aggressive sensations that imply the threat of injury (such as a speeding train), and a sexualized fascination with the body that is evident in films that present female nudity, revealing clothing, and other moments of gendered bodily display (4).

Sensations, movement, or presentation of the body were thus central to early cinema's apparatus and to the changing culture out of which that cinema emerged. A “lust of the eye” indicates a sensibility from that time which was concerned with affective and corporeal possibilities derived from thrilling, pleasurable experiences. Documentary's connection to science and the status of its “truth telling” qualities were thus not established first in the Griersonian era, which most popularly characterizes documentary, but across a longer history of modern science, including the development of photographic technology within that history.

Also, ethnography, in the form of travel films which record indigenous peoples at home and abroad, has perpetuated this discourse of science with its focus on the body of the other. Yet, more important for a consideration of documentary and pornography, the pleasure in and desire for indexical evidence about the world and the body's place in it became sexualized and specifically focused on the female body as early as the 1880s. At that time, an important precursor to Gunning's gendered bodily display can be found in Eadweard Muybridge's photographic series' that created an illusion of motion by way of the “zoopraxiscope,” a cinematic device that was a precursor to film.[3]

Muybridge's photographs, for Linda Williams, capture not only the visual spectacle and “truth” of moving bodies through new forms of visual apparatus, but the photographic series also function as a social apparatus that positions women as the objects of vision rather than its subjects. The photographs reproduce women's bodies by utilizing existing understandings of how the body is disciplined in a gendered way. As Williams identifies how Muybridge posed the human figures, she finds women fetishized in the images through self-conscious gestures (such as a





Valentine visits the tanning salon — more work to maintain her body and maximise the self.



Valentine with boyfriend Julian.



Valentine visits the hypno-therapist to improve her self-image and motivate her to exercise. This is yet another way in which Valentine is shown in a constant state of anxiety around her ability to reach her goals.

running woman grasping her breast or raising a hand to the mouth) and through the use of props (such as a newspaper, a smoking cigarette or fully made up bed that the woman lies down on). These gestures differ greatly from the male models' engagement in sports and heightened physical movement (*Hardcore* 39-40). My point here is not so much to challenge the status of women's bodies as objects in these early photos, but to notice the way these images, produced putatively to satisfy questions of science and measurement, betray an aestheticization of and fantasy about the sexualized body. These photos mark woman's signification through her associations with erotic meaning and thus by her difference and her lack.

This kind of imagery is important in the development of cinema because, as Williams theorizes:

“By denying the woman-in-movement any existence apart from these marks of difference, Muybridge himself could be said to have begun the cinematic tradition of fetishization that exerts mastery over difference” (*Hardcore*, 42).

Inevitably these pre-cinematic projections became both an investigation of the nature of motion and a forum for the voyeuristic and pornographic reception of female sexuality for a largely male audience. Muybridge's work exists at the crossroads of two trajectories:

1. a lineage of modern science that assimilates the camera as an inscription device and thus a truth-telling instrument; this is a perception that goes on to structure the later social importance of documentary film and
2. the establishment of cinema's gendered looking relations that rely on the function of voyeurism and fetishization (articulated much later by Laura Mulvey).

These looking relations are established, in Muybridge's work, through the pleasure that comes from investigating the naked female and male body. As such, these photos echo one of the preoccupations of moving image pornography.

As Catherine Russell observes, the activities Muybridge's models perform are largely those that would have been associated with the working classes (72). Furthermore, the models themselves, particularly the women, would have been working class individuals of the time. Awareness of class, then, contributes another dimension to the dialectic between the upper class, educated audience for these projections and the photos' emphasis on the models' physicality, which aligns the models with the natural world rather than “culture.” The mastery over difference through fetishization, noted by Williams, takes on added weight and complexity in the case of working class women. As I will discuss later, this

classed aspect becomes an important feature in understanding contemporary pornography.



One of many scenes in *The Girl Next Door* featuring Valentine nude or semi-nude and highlighting the vulnerability of the body.

Such a confluence of technological, social and imaginative developments that mark the pre-history of moving image pornography and documentary film demonstrates how both genres were mobilized by an apparatus of vision that was facilitated by pleasure in knowledge, here underpinning science and its instrument, photography. This desire for knowledge coalesced around the body — whether through the thrills, sensation and display of the cinema of attractions, the body of the other in ethnography, or the body in motion of the zoopraxiscope. This historical signification of the body impacts on later cinematic discourses of non-fiction and pornography by establishing the female body as an object of desire in ways that are tied to the function of both display and non-fiction spectacle. The effects that follow from co-mingling these two related systems of vision and desire find an important point of documentary articulation, later, in the figure of the female porn star. Representations in the pornography documentary offer to the viewer the female porn star both as an object of pleasure and as an object of knowledge. In the case of the latter, the narrative particularly scrutinizes the question of female sexual agency.

## Beyond *Not a Love Story*: sex, documentary, and the contemporary public sphere

In *Not a Love Story* (1981) by Canadian filmmaker, Bonnie Klein, feminist commentators, writers, and men and women who worked in the sex industry were interviewed regarding the pornography industry's malignant and misogynist nature. In response, many feminist scholars have been drawn to question the film's reductive anti-pornography stance.[4] The film was much discussed, since it raised many critical issues about documentary representation of pornography, especially in relation to women. As such, the film and the criticism it engendered offer an important point of reference for considering how feminist-derived narratives of female sexual subjectivity have become popularized. It is not my aim here to retrace the critical work around this film, but rather to indicate more broadly how the film exemplifies the pornography debate's emotionalism. I use it as an example in order to highlight the problem of organizing in a definitive way the classification and reception of visual texts about pornography.

In considering the film's emotionalism, Susanna Paasonen finds *Not a Love Story*, based in the radical feminist principles of the 1970s, as “saturated with expressions of feeling” (47). The film gives voice to a range of emotions, from the discomfort of a male actor in the face of having to perform scenes of physical domination, through to the anger and sorrow of feminist activists, or the boredom of those who discuss their work doing live sex shows. Paasonen theorizes, more broadly, the Anglo-American anti-pornography movement and its consistent anchoring in a rhetoric of hurt, anger, and fear as “a discourse of negative affect” (47). She indicates the significance of affective encounters in the critical reception of pornography. She also emphasizes that the way pornography circulates, both critically and popularly, through desire or fascination also needs to be understood. Paasonen points to a lack of a broader understanding of pornography and affect:

“While there has been a renewed interest in studies of pornography, the seemingly evident connections of affect and pornography have not been addressed in much detail” (47).

A closer examination of not only affect and pornography, but also documentary, further demonstrates the paradoxical play of the emotions. Paula Rabinowitz extends an analysis of the film's appeal to the emotions when she writes that *Not A Love Story* is

"[o]ne of the most popular and highest grossing documentaries ever produced by the Canadian Film Board; however, audiences in a nation with restrictions on the public display of pornography are not necessarily seeing a tale of mourning and outrage; many are watching for the crotch shots that are meant to horrify, not titillate." (2)

Rabinowitz is referring to the multiple affective registers that inform the film's capacity to be simultaneously compelling, saddening, and appalling. She echoes B. Ruby Rich's suggestion that the

“antiporn film is an acceptable replacement for porn itself ... , the question is whether this outcry becomes itself a handmaiden to titillation, whether this alleged look of horror is not perhaps a most sophisticated form of voyeurism” (58).

Such differing, or ambivalent, readings may occur across a single viewer or distinguish boundaries between collectives of viewers. Such a variation in potential readings presents a very specific issue for the pornography documentary's aesthetic organization. The recent proliferation of documentaries about pornography has, to varying degrees, assimilated such fascination, or titillation, overtly into the text and into marketing and distribution material. They address a viewer who desires both knowledge about pornography (documentary) and pornographic representation (pornography).

This kind of cinematic address frequently has two narrative paths and goals. It seeks to inform and educate viewers about the porn industry's sensational or problematic and exploitative nature. But it also offers a pleasurable viewing experience in which a sexual spectacle is always immanent but almost never fully realized. The ambivalence that arises here is largely due to pornography's status as a mode of non-fiction: it purports truthfully to present sexual activity and sexualized bodies. However, in spite of the extra-textual address of their marketing, these documentaries are narratively organized within the genre of documentary in ways that ultimately forgo sexual arousal for epistophilia, a desire for and pleasure in knowledge.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Images from *Inside Deep Throat*



A teenage Lovelace poses for the camera. Such images provide a visual component to the presentation of her life story.



Photographs depict Lovelace and Chuck Traynor, her manager and husband. Her association with Traynor is tied to her entry into the pornography industry.

Such a strategic address is bound up with the modes of distribution the documentaries enjoy. Independently produced one-off documentaries are featured on the film festival circuit, but are largely distributed commercially for individual sale. They can be found in video stores in “special interest” or documentary sections. Such pornography documentaries include the following types:

1. narratives about personalities in the industry: *The Secret Lives of Adult Stars* (2004), *Thinking XXX* (2004), *Hard Trip* (2003), *Porn Star: The Legend of Ron Jeremy* (2001), *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*, *The Girl Next Door*;
2. documentation of film productions: *Debbie Does Dallas Uncovered* (2005), *Exposed: The Making of a Legend* (2004), *Inside Deep Throat*;
3. documentaries examining the culture and/or industry in a broader fashion: *Rated X: A Journey Through Porn* (1999), *Pornography: The Secret History of Civilisation* (2000), *Skin for Sale (La Piel Vendida)* (2004).

While almost all of these films feature nudity, none could be categorized as X-rated hardcore pornography. Significantly, these documentaries offer epistephilic satisfaction while also presenting a discursive narrative focus on sex and eroticized bodies. The films thus have the legitimacy offered by generic documentary expectations. The films also often gain legitimacy through more mainstream avenues of reception such as arthouse cinemas and television.

The relation between these documentaries and television is important and deserves further discussion. If documentary has become cemented as a primarily televisual form, albeit one that has enjoyed heightened periods of cinematic exhibition, the pornography documentary has, within this, secured its own television niche. Over the last decade broadcast and subscription television has found an audience for this kind of programming in markets such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, and the films run either in the form of one-off documentaries, short-run seasons, or series continuing across a number of seasons. For example, in the United States, cable channel HBO has produced the *Real Sex* (2001- ) series as a “magazine” style half-hour slot. Another U.S. example is the *Cathouse* (2002- ) series, set in the *Moonlite Bunny Ranch*, a legal brothel in Nevada. In Australia the pornography documentary finds a free-to-air television release on SBS television[5] [[open endnotes in new window](#)], where, in recent years, the time slot after 10 p.m. on Friday nights has featured local and international documentaries concerned with explicit sexual content. As a mix of these two examples, the United Kingdom has featured documentary series and one-off programming on much free-to-air television, most notably on Channels 4 and 5. A number of HBO series have made their way onto British television. This programming has been described as “docuporn,”





Director Gerard Damiano discusses the production of *Deep Throat* and describes Lovelace as needing “someone to tell her what to do.”



Due to her death in 2002, Lovelace's story is presented through archived images and scenes from *Deep Throat* such as this one.



The focal point of *Deep Throat* is reproduced in the documentary. This is one of the few scenes that explicitly depicts the transgression of bodily boundaries.

with the programming, particularly in the late night schedule, more focused on the potential for arousal than on documentary's epistemic function.[6] Within this abundance of programming there are many approaches to the industry and the representation of women.

The breadth of documentary films and television series *about* pornography is suggestive of the status of sexualized representations in the contemporary public sphere. The current moment stands in contrast to sensibilities in 1981 when *Not A Love Story* was released—a time colored by politicized feminist debates around anti-pornography and anti-censorship. Also influential then was a highly visible mainstreaming of pornography with the moment of “porno chic” and the theatrical release of narrative feature-length films such as *Deep Throat* (1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973). These films heightened public debate among activists and scholars. In this environment *Not A Love Story* emerged out of and contributed to an intensely affectively charged domain in way that is quite different from the entertainment (rather than activist) emphasis of many contemporary pornography documentaries.

The current pornography-documentary trend successfully appeals to a constituency of viewers not because it makes an illicit margin visible to the mainstream, but because it furthers an already enlivened sexualization of public life. Williams describes this shift in public discourse to encompass sexuality more explicitly (she writes about it in a comprehensive way, so I quote her at length):

"Discussions and representations of sex that were once deemed obscene, in the literal sense of being off (ob) the public scene, have today insistently appeared in the new public/private realms of internet and home video. The term that I have coined to describe this paradoxical state of affairs is on/scenity: the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene. . . . On/scene is a way of signalling not just that pornographies are proliferating but that once off (ob) scene sexual scenarios have been brought into the public sphere." ("Porn Studies," 3)

This on/scenity is fostered, for Williams, not only through changing media technologies such as home video and later the Internet, but also by way of the public staging of incidents such as the Clinton/Lewinsky affair and the Starr report that followed. In a British context, Brian McNair argues that the sexualization of the public sphere, and within it the media, has led to a democratization and diversification of sexual discourse. As my discussion of the eroticization of the female body in historical non-fiction forms of representation suggests, the sexualization of media forms is not a new phenomenon. Yet the contemporary climate, as McNair and Williams' accounts make clear, represents a shift in the ideologies that inform the representation of sexualized imagery. This is a shift that occurs through a number of different registers.

One of these registers is the figuration of female sexuality based on a



As an anti-pornography advocate, Lovelace testifies at the Meese commission in 1986. This change in attitude contributes to the indeterminacy of Lovelace as a freely-choosing, desiring subject across the course of her life.



Lovelace discusses her decision to pose for *Playboy* at 51, again articulating a different view of the industry.

Images from *Sex: The Annabelle Chong Story*

narrative of freedom, self-maximization, choice and individualism. Such a concept of subjectivity makes reference to not only neo-liberal values but also the gains of second wave feminism. This view is what many scholars identify as a post-feminist[7] dynamic that effectively references the gains of feminism but, in Angela McRobbie's words, also presents an "active, sustained, and repetitive repudiation or repression of feminism" (257). It is a mode of femininity that appropriates choice and self-empowerment in ways unthinkable without histories of feminist politics, and yet its advocates often cast feminism as outmoded and no longer necessary. This popular movement into "post-feminism" minimizes the complexities of power relations and gender inequalities because it focuses on individual aspirations and appropriating social capital through maximizing sexual capital. This expression of a post-feminist sensibility often occurs through self-sexualization and self-commodification of the female body, sometimes with an ironic and knowing tone. Social sensibilities, especially where young women are concerned, often do not protest sexual objectification but rather play with the gaze in ways that embrace or enact sexism as a form of sexual agency. For many scholars, it is on these terms that female pleasure and sexuality are now frequently "on/scene" in popular cultural forms such as narrative fiction film, print media, advertising and television.

Prominent examples of this can be found in the romantic comedy genre with films such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which, as McRobbie describes it, offers the contradiction of the independent single woman in her thirties engaging an ethos of self-actualization in order to attain the fantasy of a traditional wedding and marriage. Also in a British context, "girl power" films, such as *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), as Justine Ashby observes,

"[s]omehow managed to link being sexy with being ballsy, to celebrate female camaraderie while privileging individualism. In short, the very logic of 'girl power' confounded any real attempt to politicize it" (129).

There are still more televisual examples that foreground modes of sexual agency while retreating from feminist precepts. These include examples in the realm of the reality TV, such as *Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll* and the *Next Top Model* format. Seeking to utilize their appearance as markers of status and their currency within the sexual economy as a way to fulfil their desires, the women in these shows derail the terms of feminism's collective empowerment.

If, as Feona Attwood writes, this sexualization of culture has also inaugurated a fragmentation of moral consensus around sex and proliferated discourses of permissiveness (80), this social uncertainty has been assuaged by a new morality of individualism and an ideal of self-maximization. Such a re-valuation supports pornography's shift into the a mainstream imaginary since much of the popular critique, moral disdain, and gendered scepticism surrounding the pornographic genre is overshadowed (to some degree) by an unconditional validation of men and women as equally drawn desiring sexual subjects. Hence, the social world in which the new pornography documentaries circulate is one in which reading formations are now conditioned by the greater visibility of sexual discourse. Society also accepts a narrative of female subjectivity that asserts sexual desire and autonomy, albeit often without recourse to





Chong is shown on campus at the University of Southern California, sequences that provide an important contrast to her work in the pornography industry and further the expression of Chong as feminist subject.



Brief scenes from Chong's porn films feature in the documentary to illustrate her sex work and prominence in the industry.



recognizing gendered sexual hierarchies. I now turn to explore how this narrative of female sexuality can be understood with regard to the pornography documentary, particularly considering the systems of vision and desire that inform these films.

## Documentary and the female subject

Gough Lewis' *Sex: The Annabelle Chong Story*, Christine Fugate's *The Girl Next Door* and Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato's *Inside Deep Throat* are three documentaries that attend to the experiences of women working in the pornography industry. Produced within a contemporary media sphere that has seen the popular refiguring of female desire, the films present biographical documentary narratives of the female self that have the potential to foreground this self as desiring subject. Each of these films is in wide circulation on DVD and each also has had significant exposure on the international film festival circuit. *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* and *Inside Deep Throat* have enjoyed short run theatrical release in an art-house cinema context, while *The Girl Next Door* was produced for and first shown on PBS in the United States. Each of these films structures its narrative around exploring some aspect of the industry and in so doing seeks to make visible knowledge and information that is not evident in pornographic films themselves. *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* and *The Girl Next Door* investigate the perspectives and experiences of well-known women who act in moving-image pornography; Annabel Chong in the former and Stacy Valentine in the latter. *Inside Deep Throat* differs in that it examines the context out of which the 1972 film was made, the controversy surrounding the film, and its popular legacy. The original star, Linda Lovelace (Linda Boreman), is one of a number of figures associated with *Inside Deep Throat* that this documentary features.

Made over the course of two years, *The Girl Next Door* follows Valentine at the height of her career. The film includes many interviews with Valentine, and the observational camera also documents her appearances on set; her relationship with fellow actor, Julian, and her family and friends; and her excursions to the tanning salon, a plastic surgeon, and a hypnotherapist. The opening credits are seen over scenes of Valentine, other actors, and crew preparing for a shoot. Following this and addressing the camera Valentine states:

"I never really had anything that I was really good at. I'd envy those people that played basketball all through high school and all through college. They had something they were really good at and I just never had that. I'm really good at sex .... I'm very confident in my sexual capabilities."

This begins Valentine's consistent self-narration, which throughout the film focuses on her desire for fame, markers of success in the industry, and personal success in relationships. In an early scene after reflecting on her experiences with an abusive husband in her hometown of Oklahoma,

Chong is interviewed in Britain on *The Girlie Show*, one of many scenes in which she discusses her motivations for working in the industry and articulates herself as a desiring subject.



One of many mannered interviews in the documentary in which Chong appears to be feigning her performance.



Chong appears on the *Jerry Springer Show* and offers an awkward and uncomfortable performance, again highlighting the self as an inauthentic documentary presence.

she states:

“I have the future to look forward to and it's very bright.”

She also observes that in the pornography “business women are the money makers.” In contrast with Valentine’s explaining success as an outcome of labor, Annabel Chong uses different discourses to support her formulation of herself as desiring subject.

Featuring interviews with Chong (Grace Quek), friends, family and producers and actors in the industry, *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* explores Chong’s life as a student at the University of Southern California and her work in the pornography industry. In particular, the narrative revolves around the making of a film, *The World’s Biggest Gang Bang* (1995), in which she has intercourse with 251 men in a single session, setting a world record. In a way that differs from Valentine’s positioning, Chong is from what she defines as a “middle class” Singaporean Chinese family, is an accomplished student, and employs a language of feminist critique to narrate her own perspectives of her work. In an interview on a British television show, “The Girlie Show,” which is featured in the documentary, Chong states her motivation in participating in this event:

“I wanted to shake people up from their complacency and all the stereotypes with [sic.] women being passive sexual objects.... On a personal level I just wanted to explore my own sexuality.”

Both Chong and Valentine articulate themselves as desiring subjects and as motivated by the pleasure they take in sex. Both voice a certain aspirational individualism, Valentine through discourses of labor and Chong through a language of gendered power relations, in which the self can be worked on and maximized through personal choice within a sexual economy.

In comparison with these two examples, Lovelace is not central to the narrative of *Inside Deep Throat*. As the star of the original film, her life is explored alongside that of co-star, Harry Reems and director, Gerard Damiano. Due to her death in 2002, Lovelace’s story is represented through interviews with those who worked on the film and also through interviews with her sister, friend and daughter. Lovelace herself appears by way of archived interviews, appearances on talk shows, in photographs and through sequences of *Deep Throat* reproduced in the documentary. This portrayal, which spans the life of star from her involvement in the film to her death, oscillates between casting Lovelace as a freely choosing, desiring agent, and one at the mercy of the sex industry. The archival sequences that feature Lovelace speaking to camera seem to render her as self-propelling. Yet others commenting on her life and actions describe her as less than fully aware of the consequences of her actions and, as Damiano states, needing “someone to tell her what to do.”

One aspect emphasized in *Inside Deep Throat*'s narrative is Lovelace’s well-known transition from porn star to anti-pornography activist. Amongst the footage featuring Lovelace is a sequence of her testimony to the Meese Commission in the 1980s, in which she supported the investigation’s agenda to document the harmful effects of pornography. In her testimony Lovelace described her participation in *Deep Throat* as





An excerpt from *The World's Biggest Gang Bang* and facial expressions that seem ambivalent as pain or ecstasy, thus engaging the viewer's desire to know the truth about the porn star's professed pleasure.



Chong visits her mother in Singapore and is shown as the dutiful daughter of conservative parents — one of many different dimensions to her character.

resulting from coercion by her husband of the time, Chuck Traynor. Significantly, after Lovelace left the industry Traynor went on to marry and manage her main competitor, Marilyn Chambers, whom Linda Williams describes as “one of the most prolific and durable of the post-seventies ‘porn-queens’” (*Hard-Core*, 156). Chambers began her career in *Behind the Green Door* (1972) and continued working for much longer than Lovelace, starring in many films but divorcing Traynor in 1985. In a sequence late in *Inside Deep Throat* Lovelace is shown speaking about her decision to return to the industry and do a photographic spread for *Playboy* magazine at the age of 51, at a time when she is struggling to make a living. *Inside Deep Throat* signifies the indeterminacy of Lovelace as a freely-choosing, desiring subject across the course of her life and the documentary's production.

Each of the three films has sequences in which women express their subjective desire to maximize their social aspirations through utilizing sexual capital. Their pleasure in and desire for sex is also expressed. In this regard, the films' representation of self draws upon the conditions of possibility afforded by popular post-feminist narratives. Yet, in another respect, the ambivalence so evident in the representation of Lovelace also plagues the other two films, as the documentary performances enacted by the women cannot provide a clear placement of female pleasure. These performances in front of the camera effect unstable positions within the films' textual economy of desire.

As Nichols notes, the documentary form engenders a wish for the depiction of social actors who are adept at “virtual performance,” which

“presents the logic of actual performance without signs of conscious awareness that this presentation is an act” (122).

This documentary performance relies upon a system of meanings deriving from vocal tone, gesture and posture that signify authenticity. Thus in *Sex: The Annabelle Chong Story*, Chong demonstrates compelling expressive qualities that construct her as a forceful center for the narrative. Her mannered performance in interviews and in direct address to the camera contributing to her stage presence. Chong's presentation of self is rendered in ways that throw its authenticity into question; it frequently appears as an actual performance. When she professes to enjoy her work in front of the camera, the uneasiness of her embodied presentation works to signify it as a performance. Moreover, in the scenes featured from *The World's Biggest Gang Bang*, Chong's performance during that event, particularly as it is signified in her facial expressions, is ambivalent and could easily be understood as pain rather than ecstasy. Furthermore, in ways that differ from their interpreting Valentine and Lovelace, the audience's reading of Chong's performance must consider the intensely racialized framing of women of colour who work in the pornography industry.

[Go to page 3](#)

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from mainstream film and television



*Sex and the City*: women within the sexual economy and a form of femininity that casts sex as “fun.”



*Sex and the City*: sex as “classy” and stylish rather than corporeal or grotesque.

In the case of Asian women, a racialized designation often locates them as either overtly-sexualized or submissive. This coding then marks the possibility for Chong to be cast not only as sexual object, but also as a trope of racialized Asian femininity. Yet, in some respects, the awkwardness and instability of Chong’s performance minimizes the full impact of this stereotyping. There are a number of dimensions to Chong’s character, which become evident at different moments in the documentary. In some instances Chong is rendered as a victim exploited by the sex industry and also as the survivor of a gang rape, an event recounted on a visit to London as she revisits the scene of the attack. In another moment, she is shown as the dutiful daughter of conservative parents, who in the course of the film’s production first become aware of her sex work. Racialized stereotyping is unsettled as Chong’s performance confuses any straightforward imposition of classificatory terms. Moreover, the self-narration sustained throughout much of the film reinforces seeing Chong as a subject of feminist critique and *also* as hypersexual. In this respect, Celine Parrenas Shimizu goes even further and describes Chong as a new subject of feminism — an Asian female sexual pervert. For Parrenas Shimizu, in *The World’s Biggest Gang Bang* Chong appropriates

“technologies of the camera and the contest for perversity in porn in order to diagnose conventional understanding of female sexuality as bound and limited” (178-9).

*The Girl Next Door* offers a very compelling character portrait of Valentine, but one that exists more as an unselfconscious presentation of the self, seemingly reproducing the everyday. Valentine’s performance offers up her image as financially successful and accomplished as an award winning-actor. However, her personal relationships and her compulsion for different technologies of body management, such as dieting and plastic surgery, cast her in a constant state of anxiety around her ability to maximize her self. In *Inside Deep Throat* Lovelace makes different statements at different times in the course of her life that also function more persuasively as virtual performance; yet collectively, as noted above, the cumulative statements refuse any clear account of her subjective status. Instead what she says offers a representation of the subject in process, oscillating dramatically between conceptions of her identity through sexual freedom and through describing her sex work as coerced and the result of abuse.

However, while the women themselves make take very seriously the question of asserting female desire, the documentary text is oriented towards engaging the viewer’s desire to know the truth about the porn star’s participation in the metastructure of consent. Such spectatorial concerns, then, may focus on the authenticity of the performances and the stars’ value as objects of knowledge rather than as subjects in the narrative. The performance of the women in the films becomes a point of



*Bridget Jones's Diary* is one example of mainstream female sexual agency.



*Bridget Jones* and the apparent contradiction of an independent single woman adhering to the fantasy of traditional romance.

pleasurable scrutiny for viewers as it is the locus of the defining question asked of the women, “Is their professed pleasure an authentic pleasure”?

Stella Bruzzi has considered the importance of performance in documentary reception and concludes:

“Performance — the enactment of the documentary specifically for the cameras — will always be at the heart of the non-fiction film” (155).

The documentary value of these women as presented in the films lies in their position as objects of scrutiny; the realization of their subjective aspirations and pleasure are secondary. While all documentary performances are inherently unstable as forms of expression, there is an ambivalence to these figures that present them as a particular site of anxious pleasure for the viewer.

The women's address to the camera about the intimate details of their sexual experience combines with the ambivalences I have described to encourage that the viewer seek out the most “truthful” aspects of their performances. But this is a truth that can never be determined. The testimonies offered by the women can only be read as an indication of the viewer's incomplete knowledge and the undecidability of the “realness” of this intimacy. Significantly, any potential that exists in these performances to emphasize female pleasure is deferred. Rather, the ambivalence of the women's performances is privileged, thus heightening their value as objects of documentary investigation. This eclipsing of the women's subjectivity is further inscribed in the relation set up between spectator and text through the framing of the body in pornography documentary.

## Subjectivity and the body: disgust, agency and abjection

Representations of the female porn star inevitably draw upon the significance of the body as a powerful site of meaning. As I have noted, non-fiction film's promise of a pleasurable experience of actuality has, since early cinema, regularly centred on the spectacle of the female body. This expectation has persisted in the pornography documentary as it continues to organize a relation between viewer and text in which viewers anticipate that the body will function as an object of pleasure. However, these documentaries frame the body in ways that are less straightforward than silent cinema's simple display of clothed or naked bodies. In its endeavour to render subjectivity, documentary narrative has constantly been troubled by the body's status as sexual and cinematic object. However, body always plays a crucial role in the constitution of subjectivity. In turn, the meaning and valuation of the body is itself produced through the terms of the social. In this respect, the body profoundly influences the location of Chong, Valentine and Lovelace within an economy of desire. As I have argued, viewers' expectations that the body will function as the primary object of pleasure are thwarted as desire is redirected onto the subjective *performance* as a locus of





A non-Hollywood exploration of female sexuality in Catherine Breillait's *Romance*.

investigation. Moreover, spectatorial desire is also thwarted by the pornography documentary's attempt to represent female subjectivity *and* the body of pornography, creating boundary confusion associated with disgust responses and further complicating the work of the emotions in these films.

Compelling in these films is how the characters elucidate an intimate enunciation of self through a wilful transgression of bodily boundaries. In *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* and *The Girl Next Door*, Chong and Valentine talk about the different sexual acts they perform and their proficiency in this regard. In visual terms, because of censorship regulations, while scenes of intercourse are shown, actual penetration is never included in the frame. In the case of Chong, scenes from *The World's Biggest Gang Bang* are shown progressively throughout the documentary. Excerpts from a number of her other films are also shown. Fewer explicit sex scenes are shown in *The Girl Next Door*, but Valentine is also shown on-set with a camera crew filming her in the course of production. In contrast, *Inside Deep Throat* does feature scenes of sexual penetration. Sequences from *Deep Throat* are sporadically cut into the documentary narrative. Two of the scenes show Lovelace engaging in fellatio, the practice associated with her stardom and around which the fictional premise of *Deep Throat* is based. These excerpts function intertextually as the pornographic and visual centre of the documentary, much in the way that they do in the narrative of *Deep Throat*.

The question of how documentary evidence of penetration is offered to the viewer is significant because viewers' disgust responses primarily function to protect and maintain their boundaries of self. Disgust is an emotion, but one that bears a decisive relation to an object:

“Disgust is a feeling about something and in response to something, not just raw unattached feeling” (W. I. Miller, 8).

Miller echoes Freud's description of disgust as a response formation that revolves around the body. According to Freud, the orifices that mark the boundary between outside and inside are saturated with potential to elicit disgust. For Julia Kristeva the ambiguous status of the boundary



threshold of the body, as it is recognized as abject, has the potential to obliterate subjectivity; in this moment one also recognizes oneself as a corporeal object (5). Boundary thresholds also include bodily fluids and excretions, and these, for Miller, also entail “the danger of defilement” (8). We all have a culturally, psychically and historically embedded understanding of the body that accounts as much for our impulses towards our own bodies as those of others.

While objects are not inherently disgusting, meaning can be organized in particular ways to produce disgust. Highly contaminating, association alone is enough to render a previously pristine object disgusting. Thus, the threat of defilement through association or contact can organize a disgust response. The bodily thresholds represented in these films that demonstrate this capacity are the mouth, vagina, and also anus. Both Chong and Valentine make reference to the activity and their experience of double penetration. While the films give no visual representation of this, in *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* Chong discusses her first experience of anal sex in voiceover as a less explicit sequence from one of her films is shown, suggesting that this is a feature of her on screen sex work. For Miller, while all orifices are vulnerable areas for emissions and contaminations, the anus is the essence of lowness and untouchability. Of course, the vagina, as a site of fear, hatred and disgust, also has a well-documented history and in discourse is often framed through a trope of untouchability, but in a way that is highly gendered and corresponds to ideologically entrenched, misogynist narratives.

*The Girl Next Door* contains another important acknowledgement of the malleability of bodily boundaries. The film features an explicit presentation of Valentine undergoing liposuction as part of a cosmetic surgery procedure. This scene shows the incision in her stomach and the suction instrument as it probes inside her torso. In a later sequence collagen is injected into Valentine’s lips. The camera also presents images of Valentine in the surgeon’s office as he draws on her body to record the regions that will be effected by implants and removals. In this example, because the bodily border, the skin, is transformed into an object, it too becomes abject. Moreover, in each of the three films the camera consistently centres the mise-en-scene on the naked, or semi-naked female body. Such narrativized, heavily emotionally laden images function effectively not as a sexualizing representation, but as a reminder of the vulnerability of the border or the contact zone that is open to aversive or unclean associations.

My aim here is not to propose that sex or sexualized female subjectivity is inherently disgusting. Rather, documentary’s conjoint non-fiction figuring of the body *and* subjectivity produces an emphasis on the permeability of boundaries that brings about recognition of the body’s abjection. In the documentary *about* pornography, the reactions of disgust that comprise abjection are featured in a way that is not always the case in pornographic representation. The pornography documentary works in a way that pornography seldom does, because pornography is less concerned with the articulation of subjectivity. The potential pleasure of knowing the other, even by way of unverifiable performance, as a coherent subject is central to the narrative desire engendered in this mode of documentary. Yet, this subjectivity, once posed, becomes overtaken by references to the boundary sites that once polluted or transgressed, threaten the very basis of subjectivity. Thus, the films’

reception entail a movement from subjectivity to the threatening recognition of corporeal object. As Kristeva puts it, abjection confounds desire:

“It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects” (1).

If abjection moves to the forefront of the viewer's relation with his/her object of narrative desire, the female porn star, this can be aligned with what Nichols describes as the “magnitude” of the text (1996). The term “magnitude” describes an effect a documentary text has that is less aligned with the discourses of sobriety and the historical world than a subjective intensity that privileges how the text is *experienced*. In this way the logic or formal structure that might shape the biographical narratives and articulations of the self in the pornography documentary are minimized in the face of how much meaning is carried by the body.

Laura U. Marks's notion of the documentary fetish provides a way to think through the affective dimensions of this experience more fully. Wresting the term back from its monopolization by psychoanalysis, she notes that the fetish is anything defined by its relation to a powerful object:

“All fetishes are translations into a material object of some sort of affect; the fetish described by psychoanalysis is only one of these” (Fetishes and Fossils, 225).

Documentary film, as a material object or set of objects, has a fetishlike quality manifest through its relation to the real. The documentary has a materiality based on the fetish that transfers the intensity of the object of representation. It transfers the impression

“of the fleetingness of the senses to a recording medium, both its intensity and its evanescence, requires that the fetishlike quality of the audiovisual image be acknowledged” (Marks, 231).

There is then a tactile, inferred relation between the text and what it represents. This accounts for the historical layers of meaning that leave a trace on the object represented, such as the gendered body, and which may be activated by the viewer. In this sense, that which is not explicitly stated, or represented in the filmic language of audio-visual signification, bears weight through the manner in which is transferred.

The pornography documentary offers an unique example of this function of documentary materiality. A logic of form and narrative, and even indexicality, is surpassed by the experience of the female body and its potential for abjection. Although many scenes of bodily penetration, orifices and fluids are invisible in the documentaries in that they are not visually featured in the frame, they have great magnitude or emotional intensity that is transferred to the viewer's experience of the text. The scenes that present Chong's ten-hour sex event are highly affecting because they act as a conduit for what the viewer knows and senses but only partially sees. The experience enabled by the pornography documentary again impacts upon the placement of female desire. Not only does the body's tactility eclipse the female subjects' self-

narrativization. But also if the body is deemed abject, what is considered disgusting must be expelled or disavowed in order for a stable speaking position to be established. As Elizabeth Grosz observes, for Kristeva,

“‘proper’ sociality and subjectivity are based on the expulsion or exclusion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly elements of its corporeal existence that must be separated from its ‘clean and proper’ self” (86).

These documentaries incorporate constant statements about and visual suggestions of transgressing bodily boundaries. The way the films dwell in the contact zone of the ambiguous and “unclean” serves to destabilize women as speaking and desiring subjects within the economy of desire that characterizes pornography documentaries. Subjectivity’s anchoring in the body translates into a troubling encounter with documentary form and with viewers’ disgust reactions to corporeality, rather than articulating a fully realized notion of female sexual pleasure.

## Problem of sexual capital

Recognizing “bad feeling” about the body impacts on the female porn star’s place in popular cultural narratives about sexual capital — within post-feminist narratives — that helped give rise to the popularity of the pornography documentary. The revised permissive, active sexuality that offers a new post-feminist image for women is also one that comes hand-in-hand with struggles over exclusive taste formations. As Attwood points out, gender, class, race and sexuality come together in a key confluence in today’s sexualization of culture. For Attwood, examples such as *Sex and the City* rely upon a form of femininity that casts sex as “fun,” but such a narrative elaborates “fun” sexuality in a way that can only be figured within a bourgeois culture of taste and discerning consumption. The discourse becomes one in which promiscuous sexuality must be figured as “classy.”

At stake here is the mode of sexuality rather than economic capital.

“Available constructions of a female sexuality in which activity and power are expressed in terms of ‘low’ characteristics — for example, in pornography and other forms of obscene or bawdy culture — are firmly eschewed here” (Attwood, 85).

Moreover, bourgeois sexuality is defined against that which is associated with the low. Although the classy pursuit of sex for pleasure may offer a new figuration of womanhood, this oppositional construction of the bourgeois body as against the low has a longer historical lineage. As Mikhail Bakhtin has theorized, the rejection of that which is low and the suppression of the corporeal or the grotesque body were integral in the formulation of the “classical body” of the emerging bourgeoisie of the sixteenth century. The body, since this time, has borne the social coding of class so that the gross materiality of the lower aspects of the body are transposed onto the lower social classes. In this political distancing, those “civilized” qualities difficult to attain, such as refinement, taste, etiquette and the regulation of bodily instincts and behavior, become the standards of the bourgeois subject.

Laura Kipnis poses this historical opposition as important for



understanding of some modes of pornography, for example, images seen on the pages of *Hustler*. She writes,

“The transcoding between the body and the social sets up the mechanisms through which the body is a privileged political trope of lower social classes, and through which bodily grossness operates as a critique of dominant ideology. The power of grossness is predicated on its opposition *from and to* high discourses” (emphasis in original 376).

Subjecthood in high culture is therefore constituted through the vulgar material body's exclusion and disavowal. On these terms, the female porn actor cannot properly recuperate sexual capital because she is over-identified with the lower stratum of both the social and the corporeal. This occurs regardless of the women's actual class background.

The women in *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*, *Inside Deep Throat*, and *The Girl Next Door* present differing manifestations of the porn star's experience, but all speak to female (hetero)sexual pleasure in ways that cannot find a central place in the films' structuring fantasies. The women are caught in the non-fiction ordering of desire and value by the very terms on which subjectivity seeks to enter representation, the ambivalence of the documentary performance on the one hand and the body on the other. Adding to this is the women's failure to acquire cultural capital in ways that would locate them alongside the ascending and enterprising new woman. Yet, in another respect the films, through failing in the stakes of this ideological impetus, reveal the way post-feminism can only offer exclusive, uncomplicated resolutions to the problem of female desire. The documentaries indicate something more profound in the displaced femininity that falls outside the borders of easily assimilable sexuality. Further, if abjection is caused by disturbing established systems and orders, the films reference the *difficulty* of the body, its materiality, and the textual complexity of representing and accessing the actuality of female desire within the scope of what remains a masculine erotic imaginary in popular culture.

Post-feminism's seemingly uncomplicated popular characterization of femininity and sexuality covers over subjectivity's ambivalences. Offering an alternative to this kind of presentation is the example of porn star and performance artist, Annie Sprinkle. In addition to featuring in many porn films in the 1970s and early 1980s, Sprinkle has produced a number of one-woman performances and published a handful of books. Much of Sprinkle's contemporary work is strongly biographical and she has featured in a small number of documentaries. These include *Annie Sprinkle's Herstory of Porn* (1998), directed by Sprinkle, and *Sacred Sex* (Cynthia Connop, 1992). These representations offer a significant contrast to the three films discussed here.

While they similarly work to offer the female porn star as an object of pleasure and as an object of knowledge, Sprinkle's performances differ from those already discussed as they are more explicitly engaged in the activity of denaturalizing femininity and the question of agency. If she seeks to maximize the self, she often does so through art practice rather than capitalizing her potential within a sexual economy. Belonging to a different epoch (that of second wave feminism), Sprinkle's rhetorical and physical gestures are able to achieve what Chong's can only hint at; she

denaturalizes gender and highlights the instability of speaking positions. In her documentary appearances Sprinkle describes how she takes on roles, such as the “porno bimbo character,” thus emphasising performativity as a documentary convention and more broadly as a feature of subjectivity. While her subjectivity is equally troubled by materiality, she rejects a “classy” sexuality. Rather, through the use of humour and investigation of alternative sexual discourses, Sprinkle overtly contests the dominant order. Nevertheless, as a “post-porn goddess,” although she may contribute to a proliferation of sexual discourses in the public sphere, her work remains less influential than representations that adhere to the reclamation of sexual objectification as agency.

For McNair,

"There have been significant and positive changes in the way the media represent sex, sexuality and gender. The 'relentless parade of insults,' the 'invisibility and demeaning stereotypes' to which women and gays have traditionally been subjected has been replaced ... by an altogether more complex and satisfying representational diversity." (*Striptease*, 205)

This is certainly the case to some degree, but the new representational practices McNair refers to cannot be wholly isolated from the entrenched conditions that have structured desire in the past. Erotic representations are well established in long standing regimes of pleasure that pertain to how they are activated, especially within particular vehicles of vision and knowledge such as pornography and documentary. Aligning itself with these regimes, subjecthood coheres within the affect worlds of the social imaginary. While a more complex representational diversity may exist (and the figure of Sprinkle demonstrates this), a dominant ordering of sexuality prevails. I have argued that the emotions of pleasure and desire formulate a multiform popular arena in which the pornography documentary enters into a dialogue with the viewer. Despite a proliferating sexual landscape that would seem to offer greater capacity for the elevation of female sexuality, the emotions that organize a reading of the female other also make this a conditional and difficult undertaking for the pornography documentary.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

[1] See, for example, Cowie and Renov. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

[2] As Gunning describes, until approximately 1906 actuality films outnumbered fictional films. It is this era of film culture that is central to his analysis.

[3] Muybridge's well-known images of horses and other animals offered evidence of the nature of movement in ways that appealed to desire for new scientific knowledge and his projections were shown in lecture halls to interested audiences of the time. This focus on zoology soon came also to focus on the mechanic so the human body naked or semi-naked pictorial accounts of men, women and children performing short tasks and activities.

[4] See Kaplan, Rich or Williams.

[5] SBS Television (Special Broadcasting Service) is Australia's smaller, second public service broadcaster with a charter that stipulates that SBS must work to meet the needs of culturally diverse viewing nation. [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]

[6] See Arthurs or Boyle for more discussion of "docuporn."

[7] See McRobbie, Walkerdine et al., Attwood, Gill and Whelelan.

### Works cited

Arthurs, Jane. *Television and Sexuality: Regulation and the Politics of Taste*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Ashby, Justine. "Postfeminism in the British Frame." *Cinema Journal* 44:2 (2005): 127-135.

Attwood, Feona. "Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture." *Sexualities* 9:1 (2006): 77-94.

Boyle, Karen. "Courting Consumers And Legitimizing Exploitation." *Feminist Media Studies* 8:1 (2008): 35-50.

Cowie, Elizabeth. "The Spectacle of Actuality." *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Eds. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 19-45.

Gill, Rosalind. "From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualisation of Women's Bodies in the Media." *Feminist Media Studies* 3: 1 (2003): 100-105.

Grosz, Elizabeth. "The Body of Signification." *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*. Eds. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin. London: Routledge, 1990. 80-103.

Gunning, Tom. "Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Specator and the Avant-garde." *Wide Angle* 8:3-4 (1986): 63-70.

---. "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema Of Attractions." *Velvet Light Trap* Fall (1993): 3-13.

Hansen, Christian, Catherine Needham and Bill Nichols. "Pornography, Ethnography and the Discourses of Power." *Representing Reality*. Bill Nichols. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Holmlund, Chris. "Postfeminism from A to G." *Cinema Journal* 44:2 (2005): 116-121.

Johnston, Claire. "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema." *Notes on Women's Cinema*. Ed. Claire Johnston, London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973.

Kaplan, E. Ann. "Pornography and/as Representation." *Enclitic* 9 (1987): 8-19.

Kipnis, Laura. "(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*." *Cultural Studies*. Eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler. New York: Routledge, 1992. 373-391.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Marks, Laura U. "Fetishes and Fossils: notes on Documentary and Materiality." *Feminism and Documentary*. Eds. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 224-244.

McNair, Brian. *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire*. London: Routledge, 2002.

---. *Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture*. London: Arnold, 1996.

McRobbie, Angela. "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture." *Feminist Media Studies* 4:3 (2004): 255-264.



Miller, Susan B. *Disgust: The Gatekeeper Emotion*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 2004.

Miller, William I. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16:3 (1975): 6-18.

Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Paasonen, Susanna. "Strange Bedfellows: Pornography, Affect and Feminist Reading." *Feminist Theory* 8:1 (2007): 43-57.

Rabinowitz, Paula. *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. London: Verso.

Renov, Michael. *The Subject of Documentary*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Rich, B. Ruby. "Anti-porn: Soft Issue, Hard World." *Feminist Review* 13 (1983): 56-67.

Rose, Nikolas. *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Tasker, Yvonne and Diane Negra. "Postfeminism and the Archive for the Future." *Camera Obscura*, 21: 2 (2006): 171-176

Walkerdine, Valerie, Helen Lucey and June Melody. *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Whelehan, Imelda. *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism*. London: Women's Press Ltd: 2000.

Williams, Linda. "Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene." *Porn Studies*. Ed. Linda Williams. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. 1-25.

---. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Anna May Wong: publicity still of Chinese American movie star (1931).



Nancy Kwan as showgirl Linda Low in Roger and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song* (1961).

## The Hypersexuality of Race

reviewed by [Catherine Clepper](#)

*The Hypersexuality of Race* by Celine Parreñas Shimuzu  
(Duke University Press, 2007), 340 pages, \$23.95.

Roles for Asian/American actresses are frequently divided across a sexualized racial binary: Do you want to be a “dragon lady” or “lotus blossom”? Complicating this trope, Celine Parreñas Shimuzu’s *The Hypersexuality of Race* aims to demonstrate how the dragon/lotus dialectic has been repeated and altered by the creative labors of various Asian/American performers. In her analysis of a wide array of performances depicting Asian/American female sexuality, Shimuzu urges a shift in the way feminist and Asian/American scholars have treated eroticized images of Asian/American women in film/video/theatrical productions.

Prioritizing her own experiences as a Filipina/American filmmaker and feminist, Shimuzu begins *The Hypersexuality of Race* with an anecdote of misrecognition:

“I am seventeen and riding the bus home at night. At first in whispers, the man across from me insists that we have met in Manila, then more brazenly in Angeles or Olongapo, where he presumed that I had shot ping-pong balls from my vagina ... Foremost [amongst the ensuing scuffle] was my response, “That was not me!””(1).

Shimuzu’s frank retelling of the encounter emphasizes what she refers to throughout her book as the “bind of representation” faced by women of color; that is, she understands the potential that popular images of Asian/Americans will be taken as a “fact” or “truth” concerning real Asian/American bodies.

While Shimuzu is remiss to negate her bus incident as trivial or unrelated to her study of the sexuality Asian body, her writing quickly turns a corner:

“I love sexy Asian women gyrating in bikinis on stage in *Miss Saigon* (1989), prancing across ornate Oriental sets in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), and singing about forsaken love in the melodrama *Madame Butterfly* (1904)”(1).

Shimuzu’s confession that as an Asian/American viewer she loves ostensibly “bad” texts corroborates a legacy of standpoint readership popularized by scholars like Stuart Hall and Gayatri Spivak (among



Anna May Wong as "dragon lady" to Marlene Dietrich's Shanghai Lil in *Shanghai Express* (1932).



*World of Suzie Wong*: As the "good woman" caught in a bad situation, Nancy Kwan as prostitute Suzie Wong offers the sweetness and vampiness that characterizes Asian/American femme fatales.



A Thai sex worker sticks out her

others). Shimuzu insists upon the evaluation of her own pleasure as a viewer within a political analysis of gendered Asian/American representation. Complicated questions arise regarding the critical nature of such pleasure:

- What is the role between experience and representation?
- What is the role of fantasy and the psychic life of images in formulation our understanding of their power?
- Do hypersexual representations of women as calculating dragoness, prostitute with a heart of gold, and dominatrix serve to unify differing eras of yellow peril?
- And how can viewer pleasure commingle with political dissent and feminist objection?

Shimuzu attacks the dilemma of hypersexuality by reframing the Asian female as "a bottom" (16), i.e. the recipient of desires surrounding the female Asian body. In her excellent chapter on Asian/American femme fatales, Shimuzu traces a lineage of hypersexual representation through three generations of Asian/American actresses working in Hollywood, Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Lucy Liu. Wong, a Chinese/American silent film actress, demonstrates a version of hypersexuality always in deference to whiteness:

"Wong's racial visibility works against the white woman's domestic or tameable gender and sexuality"(65).

For example, sexuality in Anna May Wong's roles is marked by perversion and racial visibility as secured through cartoon-like gestures in her most emblematic or star-making roles in *The Thief of Baghdad* and *Shanghai Express* (1932) in which she plays a conniving "slave girl" and murderous prostitute, respectively. Similarly, Nancy Kwan's characters — a "Wan Chai girl" in *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) and a lounge singer in *Flower Drum Song* (1961) — must work to undo or disprove the sexual assumptions thrust upon them by would-be suitors. For Lucy Liu, particularly in her iconic Ally McBeal role, her emotional frigidity accentuates her physical bravado and penchant for sexual hijinks.

Though each Hollywood actress — Wong, Kwan, and Liu — embodies a generational restyling of Orientalist erotics, Shimuzu's analysis of Asian/American femme fatales precludes a reading of the actresses as complicit within their own objectification. Reading off-screen interviews and biographies in fan culture magazines, Shimuzu works to recode Asian Hollywood actresses as authorial figures, as women who undermine the racial stability their characters are meant to exhibit and instead become representative figures of sexual anarchy. Interviews punctuate the chapter, allowing Wong, Kwan, and Liu to speak in their own words. Subtly reflecting an awareness of her own stardom as bound within racial hypersexuality, Shimuzu quotes Anna May Wong:

"After *The Thief of Baghdad*, the press began to call me 'celestial maiden.' They call me 'sloe-eyed.' They call me



tongue at the camera while Jean Marc Roc adjusts her legs in *101 Asian Debutantes, Volume 1* (1995).



The bar girls complain about their clothes in a behind-the-scenes shot of Bangkok nightlife in *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991).



The bargirl identifies O'Rourke and his camera in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*.

'exotic' ... They say I've never cut my hair, never worn wool underwear, never eaten lobster, never owned a radio. They say I have the longest nails in Hollywood." (89)

Gesturing at the ludicrousness of Hollywood's P.R. machinery, Wong draws attention to popular assumptions about her persona while undermining the content of such rumors through repeated use of the third-person.

While the book begins with an essay on the New York and London stagings of *Miss Saigon* and the chapter on Wong, Kwan, and Liu, *The Hypersexuality of Race* concerns itself for the most part with explicitly sexual depictions of Asian/American women. Three of the book's chapters deal with pornography. In "Racial Treat or Racial Threat?" Shimuzu examines the role Asian/American women played in the grammar of early stag films. Conducting primary research at the Kinsey institute, Shimuzu contrasts her own observations with other canonical stag studies, particularly the relevant chapters found in Linda Williams's *Hardcore* (1989). While Williams argued for the preeminence of the "meat shot" (i.e. genital display) in early stag, Shimuzu's research reveals a different visual climax in those films featuring Asian/American women. As Williams and others have noted, interracial stag films employed a visual syntax of skin color contrast in their meat shots, a trend especially apparent in films featuring black and white actors. Unlike the pornography of black/white sex, Asian/white sex offered a limited tonal contrast that failed to adequately register difference, particularly in black-and-white film stock.

"Asian-white sex necessitated a close-up of the [Asian] female face so as to include her hair and features against [the white male's] hair and features... Omitting the meat shot, the Asian face stands in for genitals." (117)

Later chapters on Asian/American female presence in contemporary pornography emphasize conflictually hypersexual elements of Asian/American sex workers. Shimuzu's writing reveals critical as well as personal confusion about how to address Southeast Asian prostitutes as authors or subjects of their own exploitation. In particular, "Little Brown Fucking Machines..." explores the intersections of global sex tourism and gonzo (verité style) pornographic film. Shimuzu examines in detail two documentary projects, Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) and Jean Marc Roc's *101 Asian Debutantes: Volume 1* (1995). The directors of both films seek out, have sex with, and then film female Asian sex workers. Shimuzu complicates a shallow (and she would argue conservative) reading of these films: one that would prioritize directorial intent over the often deviant performances of the Asian women themselves. Shimuzu's approach is a refreshing one as she attempts to undermine a rhetoric of colonialism and sadism that characterizes the conversation regarding Asian sex trade, perhaps at the expense of sex workers' experiential knowledge. That said, Shimuzu occasionally struggles to maintain sex-positivity in the face of a political economy in which male Western directors profit from the labors of underpaid Asian bar girls.

Specifically in the case of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* — modeled





The raunchy opening scene of stage musical *Miss Saigon* reinforces a fiction of Asian/American hypersexuality.



Director Grace Lee (right) poses with another Grace Lee in *The Grace Lee Project* (2005), a film that narrates the intersections of women sharing a common name.



Shimizu lauds Machiko Saito's S&M influenced films, like *Pink Eye* (2000).

after Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechuan* — Shimizu demonstrates O'Rourke's resistance to turning the camera upon himself, despite the film's direct acknowledgement of O'Rourke as a client of Thai sex worker Aoi, the film's titular "good woman." Shimizu's analysis attributes O'Rourke's ultimate failure to remain out of view as the result of unruly bar girls repeatedly pointing out the filmmaker as a disturbing presence in their occupational habitus. Still, as the narrative content of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* makes abundantly clear, the admission that Western, male, moneyed patrons animate the Southeast Asian sex trade does little to foster a sense of honest (i.e. non-performative) dialogue between sex workers and their clients. And this disruption is exemplified by O'Rourke's own failure to engage in such a conversation with Aoi.

The final chapters of *The Hypersexuality of Race* prove Shimizu's most charismatic and optimistic outlook. Cataloguing the films and/or achievements of today's working Asian feminist filmmakers, Shimizu seems at home lauding the work of Helen Lee, Mina Shum, Grace Lee, and Machiko Saito. According to Shimizu, each of these women is working to insert greater subjectivity and/or interiority for Asian/American actresses and Asian/American viewers. Oddly enough, while her synopses reveal increasingly intricate plots of desire and denial among Asian/American characters, a brief glance at *The Hypersexuality of Race*'s filmography reveals an a redundancy in casting. Canadian actress Sandra Oh appears in over half of the films Shimizu details, hinting that perhaps the interpretive labor of Asian/American actresses remains stratified.

If there is a general flaw in *The Hypersexuality of Race*, it may be that Shimizu seems so intent on presenting a model of hypersexuality that is perverse in a radical-political sense, that she then can be dismissive of the ways hypersexual images are produced. That is, she does not analyze how demand, supply, and fiscal support render a film like *Flower Drum Song* or *101 Asian Debutants* possible. I chose to read these omissions as presumptive: Shimizu perhaps assumes historical, industrial, and/or academic familiarities her readers may not possess. A pinch more contextual knowledge would greatly benefit Shimizu's reader. For instance, a brief introduction of pre-existing Asian/American feminist writings could clarify where Shimizu locates her own book's intervention(s). I would have particularly been interested to learn why and from where Shimizu adapted her use the slash of Asian/American — in lieu of Asian-American or Asian American — or how she defines the term. How does her use of Asian/American intersect with the book's overall examination of sexuality and gender? Shimizu's articulation of Asian/American feminism leaves much to the reader's imagination.

Where *The Hypersexuality of Race* succeeds most is in its attempts to



Generational conflict—Sandra Oh in  
Mina Shum's *Double Happiness*  
(1994).

complicate and compound the depictions of Asian/American women on screen with the experiences of Asian/American viewers. And while Shimuzu troubles the dragon lady/lotus blossom binary that she begins the book by introducing, her work in general does far more: She questions the role of sex and ethnicity in visual culture. She inserts a narrative of sex-positivity in a conversation overwhelmed with allegations of mindless exploitation. *The Hypersexuality of Race* is a welcome addition to Asian/American and media studies, enabling future scholars to build on the author's germinal research and analysis.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



Desire and violence—Sandra Oh in  
Helen Lee's *Prey* (1995).

### Documenting and denial: discourses of sexual self- exploitation

by [Leigh Goldstein](#)

In December 2008, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and *CosmoGirl.com* published a report summarizing the findings of a survey they had commissioned on adolescents, twenty-somethings, technology and sexuality. Entitled, appropriately enough, “Sex and Tech,” the report and related articles were made available on each organization’s website, along with press releases highlighting some of the statistics that the survey of 1280 subjects had generated. The report was immediately followed by an Associated Press article citing its findings. The story was then picked up by several newspapers, online magazines, cable news programs, each calling particular attention to one statistic: twenty percent of teens overall (i.e., boys and girls) have “sent/posted nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves.”[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Judging from the spate of articles that have followed since its publication, the “Sex and Tech” study seems to have lent statistical credence to a practice that legal scholars and some journalists have been addressing for the past few years.[2] Generally referred to as “sexting” or “self-produced child pornography,” this practice involves adolescents taking pictures of themselves naked or barely clothed or engaged in a sexual act and then posting the images online or texting or emailing them to friends. As the label “self-produced child pornography” indicates, the production, distribution and possession of these images is a criminal act if the subject photographed is under eighteen. Minors participating in this seemingly innocuous form of flirtatious or erotic exchange have been formally charged with production and distribution or possession of child pornography.

For example, in a 2004 Florida state case, a sixteen-year-old girl (A.H.) was adjudicated as a delinquent for taking pictures of herself having sex with her seventeen-year-old boyfriend and then emailing them from his computer to hers. And in 2002, in Seattle, Washington, August Anthony Vezzoni, then sixteen years old, was adjudicated as delinquent for showing nude photographs of a former girlfriend to

friends at school. Or, to take a more recent example that has received much media attention, three teenage girls in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, were charged in January 2009 with producing and distributing child pornography for taking and then sending nude pictures of their own fourteen and fifteen year old bodies and then texting the images to their friends. Three boys (aged 16 and 17) who received the images were charged with possession of child pornography. In the last six years, similar charges have been brought against minors in Alabama, Connecticut, Denver, Florida, Georgia, New York, New Jersey, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin. [3]

These cases, and the media coverage they receive, all attest to the fact that child pornography has become a crime in which minors are constructed as perpetrators as well as victims. This paradoxical stance towards minors, predicated on a construction of children as innocent and punishment of those who defile that construct, is propped up by complex argumentation on the part of judges and legal scholars as well as some equally convoluted thinking on the part of journalists. Before further engaging with both those forms of discourse and the ways in which they construct children, I would like to address the question of statistical research and the dearth of up to date studies on child pornography within U.S. academia.

The circulation of dubious statistics and conjectures regarding child pornography should be read as an inevitable consequence of the legal penalties for having any encounter with pornographic material featuring subjects who are minors. The very act of approaching persons under eighteen and asking them if they produce, possess, or distribute erotic material featuring themselves (or another minor) constitutes a crime. One's standing as scholar or researcher makes no difference from a legal perspective. Ask a minor about naked photos and you are soliciting contraband and harassing a child.[4]

While the current legislation against child pornography is certainly a research hurdle, I want to make clear that its consequences extend beyond the fate of the minors who produce it or the scholars who would hope to study them. By criminalizing self-produced child pornography, our government has effectively censored minors' right to record their sexualities or erotic identities. It is as though the existence of underage sex dealt a bad enough blow to our culture's construction of childhood; the production of a visual record of such acts has been designated as beyond the pale, a social practice that must be eradicated.

In the past decade, social constructionist scholars such as Steven Angelides and Philip Jenkins have noted the changes that the discourse of child sexuality has undergone, arguing that we are still in the midst of a pendulum swing initiated by the child rights and sexual liberation movements of the 1970s.[5] Making a similar claim about the role of innocence in defining children and childhood, James



Kincaid has argued that the child be understood as a cultural construct that is essentially an emptiness, void, or lack, a “species which is free of sexual feeling or response.”[6] According to Kincaid, children’s innocence is one that we (adults) insist upon all too emphatically. Of course, that’s not to say there’s an absence of talk on the subject of children and sex. Covering up what should be a deafening silence is the incessant chatter of adults. Having shushed the kids, we adults gleefully expound on what they must feel: duped, misguided, ultimately regretful of having exposed and/or exploited their bodies. Exploited object? Of course, it’s the part kids were born to play. But the role of subject when it comes to discourses of desire? That remains off limits.

The very terms “self-produced child pornography” and, to a less explicit degree “sexting,” reveal the ideological agenda that they further. In their analyses of the adolescent social practice of producing and sharing eroticized images, media and legal discourses work to uphold the child as innocence construct by establishing two primary villains:

- the unseen, but ubiquitous, (adult) pedophile audience that might somehow access these images;
- the technology that enables teens to create and transmit the images in the first place.

To illuminate the role these concepts have in denying child sexuality or minors’ rights to sexual expression, I will engage with the legal discourse surrounding pornography made by minors, and then turn to the media construction of this phenomenon. Ultimately, I intend to demonstrate that initiatives motivated by a desire to protect are contributing to a social construction of childhood innocence that puts kids at risk.[7] That risk and those harms take various forms. By penalizing minors for documenting their sexual desires, we hold them up to a standard of conduct they had no say in determining. When they point to the fallacies of the innocence construction, through their self representations, we punish them, labeling them as pornographers, exploiters and felons.

In addition to the damage they inflict on individual producers, these discourses of sexual self-exploitation affect a wider segment of the population, if more indirectly. The silencing of minors’ sexual desires and subjectivity encourages children in general to be ashamed of and/or deny aspects of their identities. But along with the emotional damage this ultimately may result in for minors, the cycle of silencing, shaming, and reaffirmation of innocence leads to other societal issues. Due to our current legislation and recent legal history, it is virtually impossible to hear a child’s voice on the subject of sexuality. This disregard for the “youth perspective” would seem to be, on the surface, a curious position for a culture renowned for its veneration of newness, freshness, and youth to adopt. But perhaps this silencing is more complicit with the U.S. adoration of youth than would first appear to

be the case. Building on the work of child sexuality scholars who have approached their topic from a social constructionist perspective, I intend to show that by denying minors a right to sexual self-expression, we contribute to children's endangerment. By making a minor's sexual body into what must not be seen and her voice into what cannot be heard, we have, as Kincaid has noted, made children into the ultimate objects of desire. In effect, we are fostering the very audience or "market," that child pornography laws and legislation seek to eliminate.

## Child pornography in legal terms

Child pornography has not always been designated as a sphere of sexually explicit material distinct from pornography in general. The creation of child pornography as a distinct category of erotic material, and the elaboration of a specific set of standards by which to judge images of children, dates back to the 1982 Supreme Court case *New York v. Ferber*. The decision concerned the constitutionality of a New York state law that prohibited the

“promot[ion] of a sexual performance of a child under the age of 16 by distributing material which depicts such a performance.”[8]

The court opinion upheld the constitutionality of the state statute and defined all child pornography as illegal, distinguishing it from adult pornography, which was only criminalized if it failed to pass obscenity standards established by *Miller v. California* (1973).[9]

Citing the language of Article 263 of the New York Penal Law, the court defined child pornography as “the use of a child in a sexual performance.” A “sexual performance” is in turn defined as

“any performance or part thereof which includes sexual conduct by a child less than sixteen years of age.”

And “sexual conduct” is then defined as

“actual or simulated sexual intercourse, deviate sexual intercourse, sexual bestiality, masturbation, sado-masochistic abuse, or lewd exhibition of the genitals.”

Finally, a “performance” is defined as “any play, motion picture, photograph or dance” or “any other visual representation exhibited before an audience.”[10]

In determining the constitutionality of excluding child pornography from the category of speech protected by the First Amendment, the Supreme Court cited the state's “compelling” interest in “safeguarding the physical and psychological well-being of a minor.”[11] This argument rests on the notion that child pornography is the record of an abuse and that it is the responsibility of the government to

intervene on behalf of the child, as the future of our society depends upon “the healthy, well-rounded growth of young people into full maturity as citizens.”[12] The court’s judgment is founded on an assumption that people under sixteen are automatically damaged in a “physical and psychological” sense if they engage in any of the acts specified as a form of sexual performance. I am highlighting this detail not necessarily to dispute the claim, but rather to point out that the censorship justification is made on the grounds of an assumption about children and sexuality. According to the language of the court’s decision, any form of sexual activity, whether it is consensual or coerced, is damaging for a person under sixteen.

As evidence for this claim, the court cites the original language in the New York statute, which described an increase in the production and circulation of material involving the “exploitation of children as subjects in sexual performances.”[13] It also refers to psychiatric research studies and texts published between 1978 and 1980, which link child pornography production with child molestation. Specifically, the court summarizes the research as claiming that

“sexually exploited children are unable to develop healthy affectionate relationships in later life, have sexual dysfunctions, and have a tendency to become sexual abusers as adults.”[14]

Regarding these studies, I think it is important to address the social context of when they were conducted and written. In his analysis of the construction of child sexual abuse as social problem, Philip Jenkins engages with different moments in U.S. twentieth century history and the ways in which the figure of the pedophile or child molester is constructed at different points in this history. While periods of panic alternate with eras in which the effects of incest or pedophilia are doubted or minimized, the ten-year interval between 1976 and 1986 is characterized by Jenkins as a time of almost national hysteria. In part due to feminist activism, which sought to present rape and domestic abuse as crimes of national proportion that deserved large-scale legislative measures, child sexual abuse in the mid-1970s became a topic of public outcry and national attention. Jenkins points out that while the increased number of individuals during this period who made public their personal experiences of abuse should not be disregarded, the media coverage of the topic magnified the prevalence of abuse beyond what was being documented in individual studies. Phenomena such as child sex rings, violent rape and serial murder of children and child pornography were constructed as problems that commonly occurred and that constituted an omnipresent threat to the safety of every U.S. child. It is therefore against this backdrop of widespread fear and inflated but widely circulated statistics that the research the Supreme Court decision draws from was conducted.[15]

[Go to page 2](#)

---



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Having formalized a particular construction of sexual activity as de facto harmful as far as children are concerned, *New York v. Ferber* became the foundation for subsequent legal decisions regarding minors and pornography. While court decisions and congressional acts in the past two decades on the subject of child pornography have been grounded in a similar ideological stance that constructs sexuality as dangerous and as a taboo realm from which children should be excluded, the focus of subsequent legislation has shifted from the site of production to that of distribution and consumption. Along with raising the federal age requirement for pornography subjects from sixteen to eighteen, child pornography laws in the wake of *New York v. Ferber* have mostly been concerned with the legal status of material labeled “virtual child porn.”[16].[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Virtual child pornography refers to sexually explicit material that features performers who appear to be under eighteen, either because of their youthful appearance or because their images have been digitally manipulated. In *New York v. Ferber* this material was designated as legal, and in fact the use of young-looking adults was proposed as a viable alternative for child porn producers.[17]. Given that the original justification for censorship in *New York v. Ferber* was the protection of children who were the (ostensibly exploited) participants in pornography featuring minors, a distinction between pornography featuring actual and virtual children is in keeping with the way in which the *Ferber* decision constructed child pornography as a threat.

However, beginning with the Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996, the emphasis on child pornography as a social danger was shifted from the experience of the subjects to the construction of a market. Material featuring performers who only appear to be under eighteen has become a source of contention. That federal statute designated virtual child pornography as illegal, employing a form of reasoning that focused on the market, rather than the experience of the performers during the production. The statute justified designating another area of speech as outside the protection of the First Amendment by arguing for the effects of virtual child pornography on the market place. In effect, virtual child pornography was considered to be an encouragement to child pornography consumers. By providing this audience with material, virtual child porn enables the market to exist and, as an indirect consequence, increases the likelihood that actual children would be harmed by being enlisted to furnish other material for this entrenched audience. Because it shifted the threat from the site of production to the existence of a pedophilic audience,

the CPPA did not recognize any real distinction between pornography featuring actual or virtual minors. Both forms of pornography catered to the demands of a consumer that the act was geared towards eliminating.

The emphasis on distribution and consumption, rather than production, in evaluating the social threat posed by child pornography was briefly reversed in 2002 with the Supreme Court decision in *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*. The Court determined that the CPPA was unconstitutional, due to its vague and overly broad language. As a consequence of that case, virtual child pornography was again determined to be a form of speech protected by the First Amendment.

Following this decision, Congress passed the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today Act (generally referred to as the “PROTECT Act”) in 2003. This act also centers on a distinction between the production of pornography and its distribution and consumption. While the PROTECT Act, in line with the *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition* decision, recognizes the production of virtual child pornography as legal, the act designates the promotion and consumption of it as illegal, if the work is represented in the transaction as featuring actual minors. In other words, to knowingly solicit, promote or consume a work that has been labeled “child pornography” is illegal, even if the work that is being circulated does not feature actual minors. The PROTECT Act effectively renders the content of the film as beside the point – what matters is that a producer, distributor or consumer represented themselves as intending to engage in the promotion or consumption of material featuring the exploitation of actual minors. After being declared unconstitutional by a federal appellate court in Atlanta in 2006, the PROTECT Act was upheld as constitutional by the Supreme Court in May 2008, in *United States v. Williams*. As a consequence of this statute, and the Court’s decision, the prosecution of child pornography has again been shifted from the question of conditions for production to the terms under which a work is promoted and consumed.

As scholars such as Laura Kipnis have noted, laws such as the PROTECT Act are geared towards policing fantasies rather than acts. People who seek out sexual images of children are identified as criminals by our legal system, even if the material that they solicit and/or consume did not necessitate the actual enlistment of a child in a sexual performance. Just by asking for this material, and thereby indicating a desire to sexualize children, they are committing a criminal act. The attention paid to consumption in child pornography cases and legislation over the past two decades to some degree helps make comprehensible the more recent prosecution of minors who produce pornography. These cases can be referred to as “sexual self-exploitation” not because of any debate regarding the harm experienced by the subjects at the hands of the producers during the making of the material, but instead because of the possible threat the

circulation or even existence of the material is perceived to pose to the subjects. As with the discussion of virtual child pornography, self-produced child pornography is constructed as dangerous because of the audience that it might find.

For example, in the 2007 Florida case, *A.H. v. State*, A.H. and her boyfriend were perceived as endangering themselves not only because they photographed themselves in sexually explicit poses, but also, and perhaps more crucially, because they emailed attachments of the photos to each other. The sharing of this material via email was what led to their drawing the attention of law enforcement, and the transmission was also the crux of the case that the government made for why their activities should be determined as illegal. By uploading and then sending the images via email, they were perceived to be putting themselves at risk, because child pornography consumers might be able to then access the images and potentially even pursue the two subjects. A.H. and her boyfriend were therefore guilty of contributing to and enabling the child pornography market and allowing themselves to be sexualized and perhaps even opening the door to a future molestation by one of their admirers.[18]

The argument for criminalizing self-produced child pornography depends upon a particular construction of an ever present and quasi-voracious pedophilic audience. This predatory, if hypothetical, consumer is constructed as an adult and is pivotal in arguments against self-produced child pornography in that it allows those who advocate shielding minors from sexually explicit material to designate a figure of danger who is not the ostensibly innocent child. By displacing the threat of danger away from the producer onto an unspecified and unintended consumer, legal arguments buttressing the ban on self-produced child pornography avoid the contradictory position of explicitly vilifying those who they seek to protect.

With the shadowy figure of this malevolent, voyeuristic adult in place, the innocence of these sexually active teens can again be reaffirmed. Rather than self-possessed subjects of sexual desire, they become unthinking and naïve souls who have inadvertently exposed themselves to the dangerous and unpredictable desires of adults. They become, in other words, objects of a threat they lack the foresight to perceive, and this inability to protect themselves in turn serves as further evidence for the need for regulation and adult monitoring of their actions. Ultimately, legal arguments against self-produced child pornography participate in an effort to undue the agency minors demonstrate in their creation of the sexually explicit material in the first place.[19]

## Media representations of self-produced child pornography

In court decisions and law review articles devoted to child pornography, television news exposés and major newspapers are often

cited as evidence for claims made regarding the victimized position of minors and the predatory nature of adults. I would therefore like to address the manner in which self-produced child pornography is constructed in contemporary media discourse. Through making explicit the ideological agenda of certain journalistic pieces, I hope to further demonstrate how this concept threatens minors' rights to sexual expression.

In my discussion of media constructions of child pornography, I will focus in particular on a series of articles that appeared in the *New York Times* concerning Justin Berry, as well as more recent press coverage documenting the proliferation of self-produced child pornography via cell phone use. My interest in Berry stems from the fact that the *New York Times* articles written about him have been repeatedly cited in legal scholarship concerning child pornography and the articles led to Berry's testimony before a Congressional subcommittee regarding child pornography in 2006.[20] However, since these articles appeared in 2005, and much journalistic attention has since been devoted to self-produced child pornography, and for the most part been more concerned with the role of cell phones in this practice, I will also engage with more recent articles on the subject.

On December 19, 2005, the *New York Times* published an investigative article on child pornography written by Kurt Eichenwald, a business reporter who had received acclaim for his coverage of the Enron scandal. Eichenwald organized his article as a life story narrative about Justin Berry, a nineteen year-old boy who had been producing and sharing pornographic images of himself since he was thirteen. The story traces Berry's life from the point at which he first receives a webcam, through his entrance into online chatrooms and the request and solicitations from adult men that followed. Eventually Berry came to create a series of websites which featured photos and videos of himself in sexual acts, often involving poses or performances that were specifically requested by his adult customers, as well as images of other young performers. The culmination of the article begins with Eichenwald's intervention into Berry's life and Berry's decision to turn away from his child porn projects and partners. In what was apparently intended to be a companion essay devoted to explaining the possible threat that Eichenwald's unorthodox approach in reporting might pose to journalistic ethics, a sidebar to the Berry portrait appeared in the newspaper's online edition, explaining the personal actions that Eichenwald had taken to extricate Berry from the child pornography lifestyle, including his efforts to help Berry fight a drug addiction and find legal representation.[21]

The 6,000-word portrait of Berry received much praise in the months after it was first published, with the *Times* then-public editor Byron Calame calling it in a follow-up article one of the "most important" articles that the paper had published in the recent past and, in a separate follow-up article, noting that had Eichenwald had received a 2006 Payne Award for Ethics in Journalism from the University of



Oregon's School of Journalism and Communications for "preserving the editorial integrity of an important story while reaching out to assist his source." [22]

However, even in these initial months of positive reception and celebration of Eichenwald's piece, some journalists questioned the ethics of Eichenwald's personal involvement with the central source in the story he was reporting. [23] In later months, these questions of method and ethics became more insistent when it was revealed that Eichenwald had given Berry a check for \$2000 while in the process of investigating the story, a fact that was made public in 2007 during a trial for one of the men that Berry had identified as his adult business partner. [24] In the prosecution of one of Berry's other website partners it became clear, still later on, that Eichenwald had paid Berry an additional \$1,184 through PayPal for pornographic pictures that were posted on one of Berry's sites. [25] Some commentators raised questions on what Eichenwald's motives were in purchasing these images, and whether any might have been of a fourteen-year-old boy who had posed for pictures posted on Berry's site. [26]

Since writing the Berry article, Eichenwald left the *New York Times*. For a while he held a position at Condé Nast's business magazine, *Portofolio*, but then he left that publication in August 2007 after his additional payment of approximately \$1000 to Berry was made public. Eichenwald's saga has already received much attention from other journalists, most especially Debbie Nathan, who has written critiques of Eichenwald's work for *New York* magazine's website and *Counterpunch*. Nathan has in fact become a character in the larger story herself, with Eichenwald or stories sympathetic towards him presenting her as a child pornography crusader intent on derailing his career. Given the ample media coverage of this story, I'm less interested in weighing in on the respective truths or biases of the principals and more concerned with how the original narrative of Berry is salvaged by Eichenwald's sympathizers.

Even in admitting Eichenwald's ethical lapses in paying Berry a substantial amount of money and then neglecting to tell his editors about those payments, [27] journalists and editors who argue Eichenwald's cause attempt to disentangle the quality of the article that the methods produced from the methods themselves. For example, in an October 2007 story for the National Public Radio program *All Things Considered*, the following quote from Eichenwald's editor at the *Times*, Larry Ingrassia, is foregrounded:

"To date, while Kurt's behavior has been challenged, his account of how minors can be exploited by customers and operators of pornographic websites has stood up." [28]

A more blatant construction of Eichenwald as savior is evident in a lengthy *New York* magazine piece published in the same month. Beneath the headline "Saving Justin Berry," a subhead summarizes the story as

*“Times* business reporter Kurt Eichenwald thought he was doing a noble thing by rescuing a teen from the Internet sex trade. He didn’t know how much it would cost him.”[29]

In both these pieces, Eichenwald’s basic project of intervening in a teenager’s life is essentially presented as a selfless act that had tragic consequences for his own career. Perhaps more relevantly, these articles reaffirm Eichenwald’s initial construction of Berry as a troubled child who had never recovered from his initial victimization by adult men. In both his entrance and his exit from child pornography production, the actions of an adult are presented as the necessary catalyst.

While Eichenwald and his proponents (meaning the journalists and scholars who have subsequently cited the story), construct Berry as the victim, responding to the manipulations and instructions of adult puppeteers, the terms “sexual self-exploitation” or “self-produced child pornography” are interestingly absent from his story or the subsequent coverage of it. Instead the term “webcam pornography” is used. This choice in terminology perhaps reflects a desire to distance Berry from any position of agency in the production of pornography. The emphasis on the webcam in the label works to elide Berry’s role in the making of any pornographic material. Instead, the Internet and its attendant devices become the primary culprit, along with, of course, the adult men that have access to Berry through this technology.

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

In the years since the Berry articles were published in 2005, media outlets have generated numerous reports of minors producing erotic photos or videos of themselves. While some of these reports do acknowledge the minors' role in making these images by referring to the phenomenon as "self-produced child pornography," the majority foreground the role of technology, presenting cell phones as the new, pernicious element in teenagers lives that allows kids to covertly photograph themselves and then quickly text the images to an extended network of acquaintances. Most articles indicate as a worst case scenario the possibility or even likelihood of the images ending up online, being viewed by strangers and potentially haunting the subjects for the rest of their lives.

A representative example would be an Associated Press article from January 2008 entitled "Cell Phone Porn Scandal Hits U.S. School."<sup>[30]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The article details the somewhat hopeless efforts of police officers in Allentown, Pennsylvania, to recover and delete from all local cell phones images of two naked teenager girls that had been circulated in the local high school, and what's vaguely described as the "wider world."<sup>[31]</sup> Along with the emphasis on the cell phone technology in the headline, the article is accompanied by a large and somewhat sinister close-up of a cell phone, with fingers poised near the keypad, as if indicating the ominous potential of this ubiquitous device. Coupled with this technological finger-pointing is the article's disassociating of the girls in the photos from any clear position of authorship. One girl, who bared her breasts for a photo, is described as "a victim and she's not a victim."<sup>[32]</sup> The other girl, who in the photo is engaged in a sex act with her boyfriend, is described as potentially ignorant of the fact that she is being photographed. Constructed in this manner, the story becomes one about two girls (the one girl's male partner for some reason is excluded from the catalogue of victims) who have been sandbagged by technology and an audience that is far too large to be monitored or reprimanded by the police.

Other images run as illustration for articles on sexting also emphasize the role of technology, literally foregrounding a cell phone to the point of obscuring the (presumably) adolescent body that is being photographed.<sup>[33]</sup> This choice of composition can be read as a strategy employed by media outlets to allude to their topic at hand (child porn) without running the risk of being charged with producing such material themselves. That is, the images must suggest child porn, without actually being child porn. While this visual ambiguity is

successfully achieved, it seems important to notice what the images, for the most part, fail to convey. These images successfully indicate that adolescent nude bodies are being photographed, yet what becomes less clear, at least in terms of the illustration, is who is occupying the role of photographer. Simplifying the adolescent's otherwise complex status as both subject and object of an erotic image, these accompanying photographs emphasize the technology itself as the primary author, relegating the adolescent to the less clearly defined role of object and victim. As a perhaps unconscious attempt to construct a villain and a prey, the images rely on a visual language that has often been employed in presentations of minors as victims of potential molestation (I am thinking in particular of a famous photograph of three young girls fleeing a disembodied male hand that accompanied a 1947 article by J. Edgar Hoover on sexual predators). [34]. Of course, the innovation of these illustrations is that technology has been accorded the place once relegated to adult men.

My analysis of the Eichenwald/Berry scandal and more recent articles devoted to teens sending nude photos of themselves should indicate the degree to which the media constructions of self-produced child pornography have represented minors as victims, despite their role as producers of erotic material. This feat has been accomplished through a displacement of blame or threat away from the child-victim onto the technology enabling minors to create and then transmit nude images or videos of themselves and onto the unspecified audience that welcomes the images.

## Silencing of minors

As evidenced in the above sections, legal and media discourses contribute to a denial of minors' sexuality or sexual self-expression. As a document of under-age sexual self-representation, a photo that a minor takes of her own nude body becomes an object that must not be seen and great efforts are often taken to insure its erasure. This erasure occurs on the level of discourse, but also in terms of the physical actions taken by police departments. For example, in the Allentown, Pennsylvania scandal cited above, the local police engaged in the somewhat hopeless project of attempting to locate all cell phones to which the images had been sent in order to ensure that they were deleted and not further circulated. Nearly all media coverage of minors producing and distributing nude images of themselves involves some discussion of police's futile efforts to stop the dissemination of the material.

Media coverage of self-produced child pornography indicates that along with these after the fact efforts, authority figures, whether the local law enforcement or school administrators, are pro-active about preventing production. To take a recent example, a fifteen-year-old girl in Newark, Ohio, was arrested on October 3, 2008, for taking nude photos of herself on her cell phone and then sending them to high school classmates. The incident was picked up and reported by the



Associated Press, but it has been covered in more detail by the local paper, the *Newark Advocate*. In the multiple articles that have been devoted to the case, the paper indicates that a month before the girl was arrested the local prosecutor had made a presentation at the school, warning students against the practice of producing and distributing images of themselves. After this larger presentation, the girl who was eventually arrested was taken aside and personally warned against engaging in this activity.[35] The article does not provide an explanation of why this girl was specifically targeted.

But the actions of the school indicate a preventative stance, one geared towards not just undoing or repositioning material so that a new meaning is assigned to it. The interventions on the part of the school and the police are forms of instruction. Minors are being given an education in what are the appropriate ways of representing themselves and it is, of course, no surprise that their erotic self is something they are taught to leave out of the picture. I say it is unsurprising because, for more than twenty years, scholars focusing on child sexuality, and in particular adolescent female sexuality, have documented societal efforts to deny the existence of their subject.[36]

But if this offensive effort of erasure is no longer cause for surprise, where does that leave us? If ample research, especially that coming out of girls' studies, has already documented the silencing of adolescent sexuality, why do legal and media discourses continue to participate in this silencing? And what are the possibilities for bringing together these different forms of discourse so that they better inform each other? These are questions I leave open to future research and engaged political action.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

1. “Sex and Tech: Results From a Survey of Teens and Young Adults.com,” 1.

<[http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech_Summary.pdf)>

[[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

2. See Leary, Smith, for examples of legal scholarship on “self-produced child pornography.” For a representative sample of news articles on the subject, see Clark-Flory, Lithwick, Oglesby, Popkin, Porter, Rubinkam, Semuels. While it is tempting to claim that child pornography produced by minors is a recent and increasingly popular phenomenon, no studies or data have been published in peer-reviewed journals on this topic. “Child Being Tried For Child Porn” is a catchy headline and it has found its way, in one iteration or another, into various forms of popular media. It will most likely become a part of the same cycle of misinformation that constitutes discourses of child pornography in general.

I make no claim that self-produced child-porn is the latest craze sweeping the nation (or many nations), or that the girl next door is now opting to one up Miley Cyrus in the baring of flesh department. Is there a predominant or even alternative move among adolescents to bare their breasts or undercarriages before digital cameras, and then circulate the images? Your guess is as good as mine. What I can point to is new attention paid to this possible phenomenon in media and legal discourse.

3. “Alex Phillips, MySpace”; Bean; “Blog Prank Leads to Child Porn Charge”; Civale; “Girl, 12, Charged With Distributing Nude Pic of Classmate”; “Man Gets Jail Over Photo of Nude Ex on MySpace”; Todd; “Teens’ Nude Pics ‘Spread Like Wildfire’”; “Two Teens Face Child Pornography Charges.”

4. See Kleinhans for a thorough discussion of the effect of child pornography legislation on academic research. Jenkins and Kincaid (1998) also serve as rare instances of academic work that have treated the topic of child pornography.

5. Angelides, Jenkins (1998).

6. Kincaid (1992), 6-7.

7. In this, I hope to contribute to works by scholars such as Amy Adler, Judith Levine, Jenkins, and Angelides who have drawn attention to the ways contemporary constructions of childhood deny minors' rights and increase their potential for harm.

8. *New York v. Ferber* (1982).

9. Addressing the case of Paul Ferber, a New York bookseller who was charged for selling two films devoted to images of boys masturbating, the court determined that the material was illegal, despite the fact that it was not obscene according to *Miller v. California* standards. See *New York v. Ferber* (1982).

10. *New York v. Ferber* (1982).

11. Ibid.

12. *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944), cited in *New York v. Ferber* (1982).

13. 1977 N.Y. Laws, ch. 910, 1, cited in *New York v. Ferber* (1982).

14. *New York v. Ferber* (1982).

15. Jenkins, 118 – 144.

16. Kleinhans, 22 – 23. [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]

17. *New York v. Ferber* (1982)

18. *A.H v. State* (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 2007).

19. See Leary, Lovejoy and Smith for other examples of legalistic analysis that constructs teens who engage in pornographic production as victims of their own naivety.

20. Eichenwald's Berry articles also inspired an episode of the seventh season of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* ("Web"), another example of the reach of this particular narrative and the interest it has elicited.

21. Eichenwald, "Making a Connection with Justin"; Eichenwald, "Through His Webcam, a Boy Joins a Sordid Online World."

22. Calame (2006); Calame (2007).

23. Shafer (2006).

24. Wakeman.

25. Nathan (2007).

26. France; Nathan (2007); Ridley.

27. Paying a source is against the *New York Times* standards and ethics for reporting. See “Corrections” (2007).
28. Folkenflik.
29. France.
30. Rubinkam. [[return to page 3 of essay](#)]
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. See, for example, the photographs which accompany “Bodies of Evidence,” and Clark-Flory.
34. Hoover, 33.
35. Zimmer and Roy.
36. See Angelides, Kincaid (1998), Fine, Tolman.

## Bibliography

18 U.S.C. 2252

Adler, Amy. “The Perverse Law of Child Pornography,” *Columbia Law Review*, Vol.101 (2), 2001, 209 – 273.

-----“Symposium: Problems of Censorship in a New Technological Age: Introduction: All Porn All the Time,” *New York University Review of Law and Social Change*, Vol. 31, 2007, 695 – 710.

Allen, Ernie. “Deleting Commercial Child Pornography Sites from the Internet: The U.S. Financial Industry’s Efforts to Combat this Problem,” *Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Oversight and Investigations of the H. Comm. on Energy and Commerce*, 109th Cong. 29 (2006). Accessed September 25, 2008:

[http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/NewsEventServlet?LanguageCountry=en\\_US&PageId=2802](http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/NewsEventServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=2802) .

*A.H. v. State*, 949 So.2d 234, 235 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 2007). Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://politechbot.com/docs/child.porn.laws.apply.to.minors.020807.html>

“Alex Phillips, MySpace,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 21, 2008. Accessed January 15, 2009:

<http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2008/may/21/nation/chi-alex-phillips-myspace-080521-ht> .

American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). *Report on the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of*



Girls. Washington, DC:

American Psychological Association. Accessed December 16, 2008:  
<http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualizationrep.pdf> .

Angelides, Steven. "Feminism, Child Sexual Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality," *GLQ*, 2004 (10.2), 141 – 177.

*Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*, 535 U. S. 234 (2002).  
<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?friend=nytimes&navby=case&court=US&vol=535&invol=234>

Bean, Josh. "Nude pictures lead to arrests," *Alabama Press-Register*, March 12, 2008. Accessed January 15, 2009:  
<http://blog.al.com/live/2008/03/12/> .

Bialik, Carl. "Online Warnings Mean Well, But the Numbers Don't Add Up," *Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2005. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB110617073758830511.html> .

-----"Measuring the Child-Porn Trade," *Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 2006. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
[http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB114485422875624000-UhifBvDF9HoRikGJZ\\_NWQxUYeo\\_20070417.html?mod=blogs](http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB114485422875624000-UhifBvDF9HoRikGJZ_NWQxUYeo_20070417.html?mod=blogs)

"Blog Prank Leads to Child Porn Charge," Associated Press, March 29, 2006. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://abclocal.go.com/wpvi/story?section=news/technology&id=4034897> .

"Bodies of Evidence," *On The Media*, National Public Radio transcript, January 23, 2009. Accessed January 24, 2009:  
<http://www.onthemedias.org/transcripts/2008/12/26/02> .

Brody, Leslie. "Nude pics bring suspensions for Pascack students," *NorthJersey.com*, June 9, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008:  
[http://www.northjersey.com/news/crimeandcourts/Underage\\_nude\\_pics\\_probed\\_at\\_Pascack.html](http://www.northjersey.com/news/crimeandcourts/Underage_nude_pics_probed_at_Pascack.html) .

Brunker, Mike. "'Sexting' surprise: Teens face child porn charges," *MSNBC.com*, January 15, 2009. Accessed January 17, 2009:  
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28679588/> .

Calame, Byron. "Doing Good and Telling A Good Story: A Delicate Balance," *New York Times*, January 15, 2006. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/15/opinion/15publiceditor.html> .

-----"Money, a Source and New Questions about a Story," *New York Times*, March

25, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/opinion/25pubed.html?pagewanted=all>

Cardman, Denise A. "Comments on the interim regulations to Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 (Pub. L. 109-248), the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA): OAG Docket No. 117," *American Bar Association Correspondence*, April 30, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
[http://www.abanet.org/poladv/letters/crimlaw/2007apr30\\_adamwalsh\\_1.pdf](http://www.abanet.org/poladv/letters/crimlaw/2007apr30_adamwalsh_1.pdf)

Cheng, Jacqui. "Teens send nude pics to one other, face kiddie porn charges," *arstechnica.com*, January 14, 2009. Accessed January 17, 2009:  
<http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20090114-teens-send-nude-pics-to-one-other-face-kiddie-porn-charges.html> .

Civale, Craig. "Student faces porn charge over text message sent by classmate," *WFAA- TV*, October 8, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008: [http://www.khou.com/news/state/stories/khou081008\\_ar\\_porntext.f31234e3.html](http://www.khou.com/news/state/stories/khou081008_ar_porntext.f31234e3.html)

Clark-Flory, Tracy. "The New Pornographers," *Salon.com*, February 20, 2009. Accessed February 22, 2009:  
[http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2009/02/20/sexting\\_teens/index.html](http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2009/02/20/sexting_teens/index.html) .

Collier, Anne. "Teen-distributed child porn," *NetFamilyNews.org*, January 7, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008:  
<http://www.netfamilynews.org/2008/01/teen-distributed-child-porn.html> .

"Corrections," *New York Times*, March 6, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/06/pageoneplus/corrections.html> .

Eichenwald, Kurt. "Through His Webcam, a Boy Joins a Sordid Online World," *New York Times*, December 19, 2005. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/19/national/19kids.ready.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/19/national/19kids.ready.html?_r=1&oref=slogin) .

-----"Making a Connection with Justin," *New York Times*, December 19, 2005. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/19/business/19kidswebessay.html> .

Eko, Lyombe. "Regulation of Computer-generated virtual Child Pornography under American and French Jurisprudence: One Country's Protected "Speech" is another's Harmful Smut." *Paper*

presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Marriott Hotel, San Diego, CA, May 27, 2003 <Not Available>. Accessed September 25, 2008:

[http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p111528\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p111528_index.html) .

Fla. Stat. § 827.071 (2008)

<[http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App\\_mode=Display\\_Statute&URL=Ch0827/SEC071.HTM](http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=Ch0827/SEC071.HTM)>

Fine, Michelle. "Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (February), pp. 29 - 53.

Finkelhor, David and Richard Ormrod. "Child Pornography: Patterns From NIBRS," *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, December 2004. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/204911.pdf>

Folkenflik, David. "Seizures Hurt Memory, Ex-'Times' Reporter Says," *NPR*, October 19, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15430924> .

France, David. "Saving Justin Berry," *New York Magazine*, October 27, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://nymag.com/guides/money/2007/39957/>

Garfinkle, Elizabeth. "Coming of Age in America: The Misapplication of Sex-Offender Registration and Community-Notification Laws to Juveniles," *California Law Review*, 91, 163 – 208.

"Girl, 12, Charged With Distributing Nude Pic of Classmate," Associated Press, June 24, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008:

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,370987,00.html> .

Greenhouse, Linda. "'Virtual' Child Pornography Ban Overturned," *New York Times*, April 17, 2002. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A04E1DA1F3CF934A25757C0A9649C8B63> .

-----"Justices Agree to Revisit Child Pornography Laws," *New York Times*, March 27, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/27/washington/27scotus.html> .

-----"Supreme Court Upholds Child Pornography Law," *New York Times*, May 20, 2008. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/20/washington/20scotus.html> .

Gregg, Ron. "Queer performance, youth and YouTube," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. No. 50, Spring 2008.

Hoover, J. Edgar. "How Safe is Your Daughter?" *American Magazine* (July 1947), 32-3, 102-4.

Jenkins, Philip. *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

-----*Beyond Tolerance: Child Pornography on the Internet*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Kincaid, James. *Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. London: Routledge, 1992.

----- *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

Kitzinger, Jenny. "Defending Innocence: Ideologies of Childhood," *Feminist Review*, 28, 77 – 88.

Kipnis, Laura. *Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Kleinhans, Chuck. "Virtual Child Porn: The Law and the Semiotics of the Image," *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 3 (1), 2004, 17 – 34.

Kobak, Steve. "Student arrested for distributing nude photo," *The Hour-online*, June 24, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008: <http://dev.thehour.com/story/70901> .

Lanning, K. and A. Burgess. "Child Pornography and Sex Rings," *Pornography: Research Advances & Policy Considerations*, eds. D. Zillmann and J. Bryant. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1989.

Leary, Mary Graw. "Self-Produced Child Pornography: The Appropriate Societal Response to Juvenile Self-Sexual Exploitation," *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law*, Fall, 2007, Vol. 15, 1-50.

Levine, Judith. *Harmful to Minors. The perils of protecting children from sex*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003.

Lithwick, Dahlia. "Textual Misconduct," *Slate*, February 14, 2009. Accessed February, 2009: <http://www.slate.com/id/2211169/>.

Lovejoy, Tyler Patrick. "A New Playground: Sexual Predators and Pedophiles Online: Criminalizing Cyber Sex Between Adults and Minors," *St. Thomas Law Review*, Winter, 2008, Vol. 20, 311 – 355.

"Man Gets Jail Over Photo of Nude Ex on MySpace," *Lakeland Ledger*, August 29, 2007. Accessed December 21, 2008: <http://www.theledger.com/article/20070829/NEWS/708290447/1004> .



Mathis, Jo and Art Aisner. "Teen's photo considered child porn," *Ann Arbor News*, October 16, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008:  
<http://www.mlive.com/news/annarbornews/index.ssf?/base/news-29/1224168016236750.xml&coll=2>.

Miner, Michael. "Eichenwald v. Nathan," *Chicago Reader*, March 12, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://blogs.chicagoreader.com/news-bites/2007/03/12/eichenwald-v-nathan/>

-----"The Torments of Kurt Eichenwald," *Chicago Reader*, October 30, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://blogs.chicagoreader.com/news-bites/2007/10/30/torments-kurt-eichenwald/#comments>

Nathan, Debbie. "The Eichenwald Scandal," *Counterpunch*, August 1, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.counterpunch.org/nathano8012007.html>.

-----"NY Times Reporter Posing as Online Predator," *Counterpunch*, September 14, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/opinion/25pubed.html?pagewanted=all>.

*New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747 (1982)  
<<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgibin/getcase.pl?friend=nytimes&navby=case&court=US&vol=458&invol=747>>

O'Hara, Jim. "Student in 'Girls Gone Wild at C-NS' case gets probation," *Central New York News*, May 2, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008:  
[http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2008/05/student\\_in\\_girls\\_gone\\_wild\\_at.html](http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2008/05/student_in_girls_gone_wild_at.html).

Oglesby, Christy. "Cells, texting give predators secret path to kids," *CNN.com*, January 11, 2008. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.cnn.com/2008/CRIME/01/11/teachers.charged/index.html>

Olander, Valerie. "Case of explicit cell phone photo dropped," *Detroit News*, November 19, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008:  
<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081119/METRO04/811190369/1015/rss04>.

Oppat, Susan L. "Update: No charges in Pinckney cell phone case," *Livingston Community News*, December 15, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008:  
[http://blog.mlive.com/lcn/2008/12/update\\_no\\_charges\\_in\\_pinckney.html](http://blog.mlive.com/lcn/2008/12/update_no_charges_in_pinckney.html).

Oswell, David. "Internet Child Protection Regulation and Children's Media(ted) Rights: A Genealogical Account." *Paper presented at the*

annual meeting of the The Law and Society Association, TBA, Berlin, Germany, July 25, 2007. Accessed

September 25, 2008:

[http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p188369\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p188369_index.html) .

Popkin, Helen A.S. "Kids Find Paradise by the Cellphone Light?"

*MSNBC.Com*, June 6, 2008. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24993253/>

"Porn's Fine Lines," *On The Media*, *National Public Radio* transcript, December 26, 2008. Accessed January 2, 2009:

<http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2008/12/26/02>

Porter, Liz. "Malice in Wonderland," *Sunday Age*, August 10, 2008,18.

Radosh, David. "How Big is the Online Kiddie-Porn Industry?" April 5, 2006. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.radosh.net/archive/001481.html> .

Reitz, Stephanie. "Teens Sending New Photos Via Cellphone,"

*Associated Press*, June 4, 2008. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24970829/>

Ridley, John. "Sex, Checks and the 'New York Times,'" *National Public Radio*, August 15, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:

[http://www.npr.org/blogs/visibleman/2007/08/sex\\_checks\\_and\\_the\\_new\\_york\\_ti\\_1.html](http://www.npr.org/blogs/visibleman/2007/08/sex_checks_and_the_new_york_ti_1.html)

Ropelato, Jerry. "Internet Pornography Statistics," *Internet Filter Review*. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html> .

Rubinkam, Michael. "Cellphone Porn Scandal Hits U.S. School,"

*Associated Press*, January 25, 2008. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22840727/> .

Schafer, Jack. "The *New York Times* Legal Aid Society," *Slate*, December 19, 2005. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.slate.com/id/2132702/> .

-----"KurtEichenwald.com: The Back Story," *Slate*, January 6, 2006. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.slate.com/id/2133905/> .

"School Confiscates Cell Phones After Nude Photos of Junior Hill Girls Circulate," *Foxnews.com*, May 21, 2008. Accessed December 21, 2008

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,356873,00.html> .

Samuels, Alana. "Naked photos on phones get teens in hot water," *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 2008. Accessed December 17, 2008:

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2008/11/> .

“Sex and Tech: Results From a Survey of Teens and Young Adults,” TRU study commissioned by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com. Accessed January 12, 2009:

[http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech_Summary.pdf) .

“Sex, Teens and the Web,” *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees*, CNN television broadcast, April 4, 2006. Accessed September 25, 2008: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0604/04/acd.02.html> .

“Sexting: New Dangerous Teen Trend,” *ABCNews.com*, May 15, 2008. Accessed

September 25, 2008:

<http://www.wjla.com/news/stories/0508/520195.html> .

“Sexual Exploitation of Children Over the Internet: What Parents, Kids and Congress Need to Know About Child Predators,” Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Oversight and Investigations, 109th Cong. 75 (2006).

Sher, Julian and Benedict Carey. “Debate on Child Pornography’s Link to Molesting,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/19/us/19sex.html> .

Smith, Stephen F. “Jail for Juvenile Child Pornographers?: A Reply to Professor Leary,” *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law*, Spring, 2008, Vol. 15, 505 - 544.

*State v. Vezzone*, 127 Wash. App. 1012 (Wash. Ct. App. 2005)

<[http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/us/Inacademic/mungo/lexseestat.do?bct=A&risb=21\\_T4669937084&homeCsi=151695&A=0.412184782426957&urlEnc=ISO-8859-1&&citeString=127 Wn. App. 1012&countryCode=USA](http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/us/Inacademic/mungo/lexseestat.do?bct=A&risb=21_T4669937084&homeCsi=151695&A=0.412184782426957&urlEnc=ISO-8859-1&&citeString=127 Wn. App. 1012&countryCode=USA)>

Steele, Margaret Farley. “Nude Photos Spur Internet Warnings,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2008, CT1.

Sullivan, Carol. “Internet Traders of Child Pornography: Profiling Research,” *The Department of Internal Affairs*, October 2005.

Accessed September 25, 2008:

[http://www.dia.govt.nz/pubforms.nsf/URL/Profilingupdate2.pdf/\\$file/Profilingupdate2.pdf](http://www.dia.govt.nz/pubforms.nsf/URL/Profilingupdate2.pdf/$file/Profilingupdate2.pdf).

“Teens’ Nude Pics ‘Spread Like Wildfire,’” Associated Press, June 4, 2008. Accessed January 15, 2009:

[http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/06/04/national/main4153765.shtml?source=RSSattr=SciTech\\_4153765](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/06/04/national/main4153765.shtml?source=RSSattr=SciTech_4153765) .

“Thirteen Year Old Faces Child Pornography Rap,” *UPI*, October 15, 2004. Accessed September 25, 2008:

[http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2004/10/15/13-year-old\\_faces\\_child\\_pornography\\_rap/UPI-5111097881716/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2004/10/15/13-year-old_faces_child_pornography_rap/UPI-5111097881716/) .

Todd, Deborah M. "Dial 'P' for porn: Explicit cell phone pics of underage teens illegal," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 5, 2008. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08157/887282-54.stm> .

Tolman, Deborah. *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk Sexuality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

"Two Teens Face Child Pornography Charges," Associated Press, March 29, 2006. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
[http://www.boston.com/news/local/rhode\\_island/articles/2006/03/29/two\\_teens\\_face\\_child\\_pornography\\_charges/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/rhode_island/articles/2006/03/29/two_teens_face_child_pornography_charges/) .

*United States v. Williams*, No. 06-694 (2008).  
<<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=000&invol=06-694&friend=nytimes>>

Wakeman, Jessica. "Perilous Reporting: The Risk of Writing About Child Porn Laws," *Extra!*, January/February 2007. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=3052> .

Wolack, Janice, Kimberly Mitchell and David Finckelhor. "Online Victimization of Youth: Five Years Later," *Crimes Against Children Research Center*, 2006. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
[http://www.missingkids.com/en\\_US/publications/NC167.pdf](http://www.missingkids.com/en_US/publications/NC167.pdf) .

Wortley, Richard and Stephen Smallbone. "Child Pornography on the Internet," *Problem-Oriented Guides for Police, Problem-Specific Guides Series*, No. 41, May 9, 2006. Accessed September 25, 2008:  
<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/files/RIC/Publications/e04062000.pdf> .

Yiull, Richard. "Male Age-Discrepant Intergenerational Sexualities and Relationships," Unpublished PhD Thesis. Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2004.

Zetter, Kim. "Child Porn Laws Used Against Kids Who Photograph Themselves," *Wired*, January 15, 2009. Accessed January 16, 2009:  
<http://blog.wired.com/27bstroke6/2009/01/kids.html> .

Zimmer, Russ. "Girl Charged with Sending Nude Photos via Cell Phone," *Newark Advocate*, October 7, 2008. Accessed October 8, 2008:  
<http://www.newarkadvocate.com/article/20081007/NEWS01/810070304> .

-----"Hottinger: Law Didn't Anticipate Cellphone Photo Case," *Newark Advocate*, October 8, 2008. Accessed October 10, 2008:



<http://www.newarkadvocate.com/article/20081008/NEWS01/810080302>

-----“Defense Wants Cell-phone Nudity Charges Dropped,” *Newark Advocate*, October 16, 2008. Accessed October 16, 2008:

<http://www.newarkadvocate.com/article/20081016/NEWS01/810160318>

-----“Teen: Others sent her ‘unclothed’ pics,” *Newark Advocate*, November 20, 2008. Accessed November 21, 2008:

<http://www.newarkadvocate.com/article/20081120/NEWS01/81120026/1002> .

Zimmer, Russ and Seth Roy. “Prosecutor: Girl Ignored Warning by School Officials,” *Newark Advocate*, October 8, 2008. Accessed October 16, 2008:

<http://www.newarkadvocate.com/article/20081007/NEWS01/810070304> .

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Milk and gay political history

by [Harry M. Benshoff](#)



The 1-sheet poster for this year's boutique Hollywood/independent neo-queer film.



Like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Milk* is sold by Universal/Focus Features as a prestige picture rather than a “gay film” *per se*.

*Milk* (2007) is this year's Hollywood/independent “boutique studio” neo-queer prestige picture. By that, I mean it is this year's *Far From Heaven* (2002), *The Hours* (2002), or *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). These are all films that transcend the tiny budgets and limited release patterns of most independent LGBT films, precisely because small “independent” divisions of major Hollywood corporations manufacture them. Like *Brokeback Mountain*, *Milk* was released under the banner of Focus Features, currently a division of Universal Pictures. What this means is that unlike “truly” independent films about queer people and queer concerns (more and more of which are bypassing theatres altogether and going straight to DVD release), “boutique studio” films usually feature big-name Hollywood stars, modest budgets, and are marketed as prestigious critic-and-award-buzz pictures rather than films about lesbian, gay, or queer content *per se*. They can and do move out of the relatively small ghetto reserved for films perceived and marketed as LGBT films, and they are seen by increasingly wider audiences, especially as they follow platforming release patterns facilitated by their corporate parents. Thus your local rural multiplex may soon be showing *Milk*, just as it did *Brokeback Mountain* a few years ago.

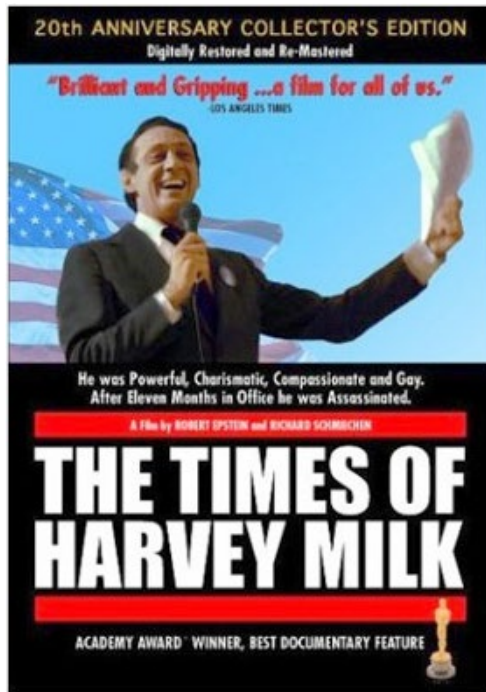
The two films are interesting to compare, as they illuminate different aspects of the gay rights movement, and strike different “nerves” in heterosexual United States. *Milk* — even if it wins numerous Oscars — will never be the phenomenon that *Brokeback Mountain* was, partly because it does not carry the same semantic charge. *Brokeback Mountain* is a fictionalized and highly emotional romance as well as a queering of the presumably heterosexual Western genre and its mythic representations of U.S. masculinity. That is arguably the main reason it caused such a pop culture panic in some quarters. On the other hand, *Milk* is a true story about self-defined gay men and their struggles to find a voice within mainstream U.S. politics. (Paradoxically however, *Milk* features more scenes of male-male intimacy than does *Brokeback Mountain*.)

*Milk* may ultimately be the more important film because of its ties to “real life” and its ambitions to rediscover and re-circulate an important story still missing from most accounts of the nation's civil rights movement. Although both films roughly chronicle the same time period (the immediate pre- and post-Stonewall eras of the 1960s and the 1970s), *Milk* is concerned with actual historical (and contemporary) politics, while *Brokeback* is concerned with mythic ones. Indeed, it is hard not to read *Milk* in light of the election of Barack Obama, as both Obama and Milk championed a “message of hope” for the underrepresented. Similarly, *Milk*'s focus on California's Briggs Initiative (homophobic legislation of the era designed to remove LGBT teachers from public schools) eerily echoes the recent passage of Proposition 8 in California. Both laws sought to legislate discrimination via voter mandate, overruling court-ordered decisions about equal rights protections.

For anyone who does not know, *Milk* tells the story of the first openly gay elected official in the United States, San Francisco City Supervisor Harvey Milk



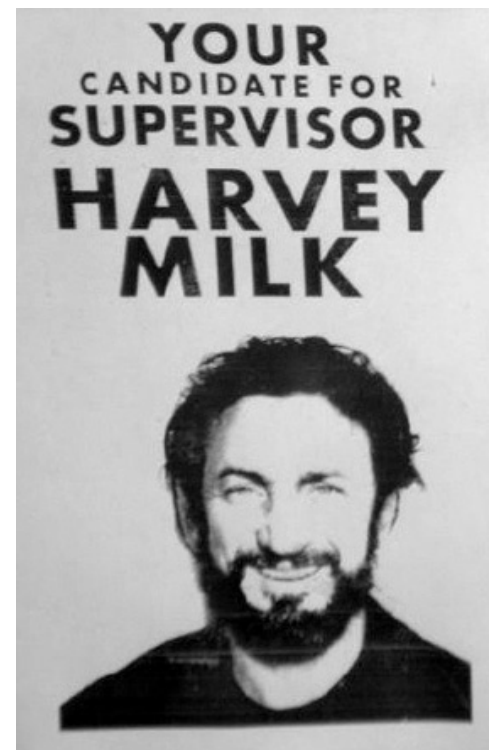
The real Harvey Milk.



*Milk* almost needs to be viewed in comparison to the Oscar-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984). *Milk* makes use of some of the same footage.

(played by Sean Penn), who was assassinated in 1978 by an unhinged right wing politician named Dan White (played by Josh Brolin). Their story had been told on film once before, in the Oscar-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984). *Milk* — although scripted by Dustin Lance Black (*The Journey of Jared Price* [2000], *Big Love* [2006-]) and enacted by upcoming Hollywood stars like James Franco and Emile Hirsch — remains remarkably faithful to the facts of Harvey Milk's life, at least as represented by the documentary. *Milk* even goes a bit further than the documentary in relating the emotional intricacies of Harvey's character, noting the suicides that plagued his lovers, including that of Jack Lira (Diego Luna), an incident missing from the documentary altogether. In fact, footage from *The Times of Harvey Milk* as well as other documentaries and television news shows of the era commingle with recreated scenes throughout *Milk*, a facet of its queer hybrid style that director Gus Van Sant wanted to bring to the film since he first became involved with it. (Somewhat infamously, a Hollywood biopic about Harvey Milk had languished in development hell since at least the early 1990s.)

It is not just the presence of New Queer Cinema alumnus Gus Van Sant that makes *Milk* "neo-queer," a term that might also describe most if not all of these recent hybrid boutique films with LGBT content. I use the term neo-queer to distinguish these films from New Queer Cinema itself, a movement of early 1990s tiny-budgeted activist and independent films like *Poison* (1991), *The Living End* (1992), and Van Sant's own *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). Neo-queer films represent a development from those films, chiefly through bigger budgets, the backing of major studios, and less "in-your-face" rhetoric. And although I would be loathe to label these boutique films as New Queer Cinema, they are nonetheless queer in style and content via their insistence on historicizing their subjects' sexualities, a primary goal of queer theory, New Queer Cinema, and other forms of queer artistic practice. Thus, rather than wallow in a fuzzy glowing nostalgia (which the lighting crew and cinematographer Harris Savides took pains to eschew)[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)], *Milk* uses documentary and television footage as a way to anchor Harvey's life in an actual historical era.



Sean Penn as Harvey Milk is carefully ... actual documentary footage.



worked into 1970s period design as well as...

Compare film version to original Milk campaign poster.



James Franco as Harvey's lover Scott Smith; the two get more smooches in *Milk* than Jack and Ennis ever did in *Brokeback Mountain*.



Recreating San Francisco Gay Pride 1978. Harvey Milk's actual Gay Pride speech...

Like *The Times of Harvey Milk*, *Milk* is as much about a movement and an era as it is about a man (a point Sean Penn's Harvey makes throughout the film). Thus, we see Harvey's lover Scott transform from late-1960s hippy to mid-1970s clone, while listening to the music of David Bowie, Sylvester, and faux-Euro pop (on a turntable!) scored by Danny Elfman. Internecine battles between the era's gay leaders are also dramatized, as when David Goodstein, then-editor of *The Advocate* advocates a go-slow approach to Harvey's direct challenges. Anita Bryant's mid-1970s crusade against civil rights protections for LGBT Americans, and California State Senator Briggs's Proposition 6 campaign are both given extensive screen time. The then-everyday occurrences of police brutality, hate mail, rural isolation, and fear of attack just walking down the street are all dramatized in *Milk*, and the actual hate crime murder of Robert Hillisboro becomes a key point in the narrative. Perhaps most remarkably, the film opens with documentary footage from the 1960s that depicts the then-standard practice of police officers raiding peaceful gay bars, rounding up and handcuffing men in suits who look like refugees from AMC's *Mad Men* (yet another recent text to historicize carefully the sexualities of previous generations). These are all important historical facts about the gay rights movement that straight audiences (as well as younger queer ones) may never have considered before.

Van Sant also uses still photos, various film stocks, and simulated home movie footage (as when Harvey and Scott first travel west to San Francisco) to underline his concern with the specific discourses of various visual forms. Like much queer cinema (and especially the work of Todd Haynes), *Milk*'s visually mixed style literally underlines the ways and means that cinematic and televisual apparatuses can and do construct multiple histories of singular events. Harvey too, like many countercultural leaders and queer filmmakers, was acutely aware of the aesthetic nature of political discourse. As the film shows, he was not opposed to staging press conferences or street demonstrations as grand theatrical events, much like his beloved operas. And while the film demonstrates that politics is theatrical, it itself simultaneously attests to the political nature of art.

Theorists like Monica B. Pearl have noted New Queer Cinema's gestation within the AIDS crisis, and the ways that its films are "preoccupied with death and time and history."<sup>[1]</sup>[CHECK FOOTNOTES AND THEIR NUMBERING. SEE NOTES AND TEXT ONLY PAGES] *Milk* is set entirely before the AIDS crisis, yet it too is preoccupied with those themes, deliberately playing with time and history as they lead up to Harvey's death. After its initial montage of documentary footage, *Milk* introduces its central framing device: Harvey himself in 1978 narrating a tape of his life to be played in case of his death. (Many of these lines are taken directly from Milk's actual recordings.) Periodically the film returns to this scene as Harvey's story unfolds more or less in chronological order: his meeting with Scott in New York City, their opening a camera store in the Castro that was also an impromptu community center, his several unsuccessful runs for office, and his ultimate election to City Supervisor. Time becomes most obviously unstuck in the quiet sequence preceding Milk's assassination. In it, Harvey's dimly-lit late night talk on the telephone with Scott — reminiscing about their past and some possible future — is intercut with the harsh light of the next morning, as Dan White sits on his suburban couch, plotting his revenge against Milk and Mayor Moscone (who was his other victim).





...and parade ride from 1978 are meticulously recreated in *Milk*.



Emile Hirsch as Cleve Jones, who would later go on to create the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.



Alison Pill as Anne Kronenberg, the woman who helped Harvey Milk finally get elected, seen here with Emile Hirsch.

The film also features some Van Sant signature auteur touches: slow-motion shots of falling chads that recall the fizzing bubbles washing over the images of *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), along with multiple split-screen images of a telephone tree that suggest both the magazine cover pin-ups of *My Own Private Idaho* as well as Van Sant's Warhol-inspired urge for serial reproduction. Most obviously, the floating steadicam shots that follow Dan White through the corridors of City Hall the morning of his murderous rampage bring to mind their similar use in *Elephant* (2003). But it is Van Sant's intermingling of the real and the fictionalized that remains at the core of *Milk*'s queer style. Several actual key players from the era (including Tom Ammann, a gay teacher who fought hard against the Briggs Initiative and later became a City Supervisor himself) appear in minor roles. And the film ends with a sequence that shows the "real life" figures that the film's characters were based upon — from Cleve Jones (who would go on to create the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt) to Danny Nicoletta (a photographer who documented much of the era's struggles).



Penn as Milk and Victor Garber as Mayor George Moscone, both victims of Dan White's murderous rampage.



New Queer Cinema alumnus Gus Van Sant brings many of his auteur touches to *Milk*, in the process

At Harvey's birthday party in San Francisco City Hall, Harvey is surrounded by friends and lovers.



Actor Lucas Grabeel plays photographer Danny Nicoletta in *Milk*.

foregrounding the importance of film form to historical knowledge.

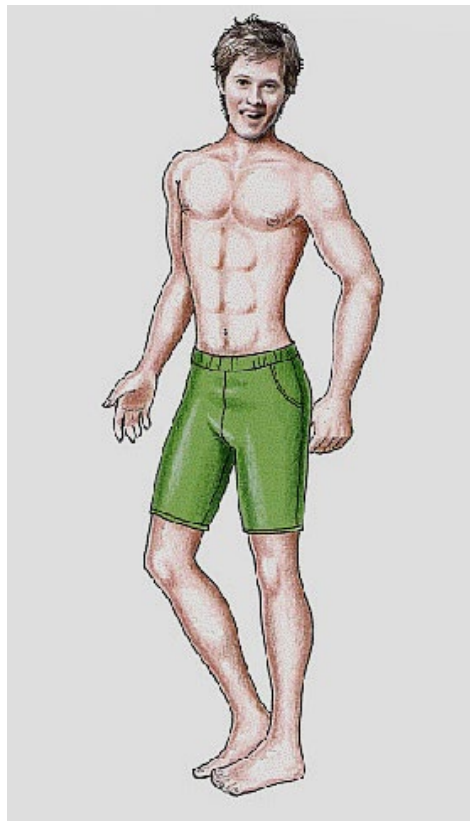
It is nice to see actor Lucas Grabeel, best known for playing the crypto-gay boy Ryan Evans in the *High School Musical* franchise (2006, 2007, 2008), here playing the out-and-proud Danny Nicoletta. Perhaps that fact best illustrates the nexus of where cinema and sexuality exist in 2009. Every year or so — at least since they bought up most of the independent film distributors in the 1990s — Hollywood releases a thoughtful film or two about queer Americans and their civil rights (or lack thereof), and those films often receive a great deal of critical praise. Yet, those same subjects are still forbidden from being mentioned in most high schools, let alone *High School Musical* blockbusters, where the queer kids are still hidden behind closet doors, albeit flashy ones. Personally, I long for the day when gay history and practical, factual information about sexuality can be taught in the public schools and not be relegated to the art house theatre. As good and as important a film like *Milk* is, it is still a drop in the bucket of pop culture discourses (like those constructing Ryan Evans in *High School Musical*) that still represent queers as sniveling stereotypes conveying ideologies of secrecy, shame, and marginalization.

I will end with a few personal observations/anecdotes. I encountered a great deal of homophobic hostility when I first attempted to teach *The Times of Harvey Milk* to a general student body here at the University of North Texas, some 9 years ago. Catcalls and homophobic remarks in the classroom led me to hand out some information specifically on the subject, which was resented by the students not only for its subject matter but perhaps even more so for being extra required reading. Student evaluations accused me of pushing the “gay agenda,” and I still get an occasional comment or two along those lines. Since then however, issues (and readings) about race, class, gender, and sexuality are built into all my classes as a matter of course. Furthermore, UNT now has a “Study of Sexualities” minor program, several active campus groups for queer students and faculty, and a few years ago *The Advocate* even named UNT as a good school for LGBT students. So things do change. Films like *Milk* may still be few and far between, but their very existence plays an important role in the ongoing hegemonic negotiation of sexuality and civil rights in the United States.



At the multiplex, Grabeel also plays the fabulous Ryan Evans in Disney's *High School Musical* franchise, a crypto-gay





character who seems to be forever channeling Peter Allen and Elton John.

Even if today's gay kids can't get into see Milk (let alone learn about him in high school), they can still [play dress-him-up on-line](#).

See [YouTube video of all Ryan's changes of beret](#). Gay history remains marginalized while queer style fuels the box office.

[Go to Notes](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### Notes

1. See Jean Oppenheimer, "A High Price for Progress," *American Cinematographer* (December 2008) 29-43. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

2. Monica B. Pearl, "AIDS and New Queer Cinema," in Michele Aaron, ed., *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) 28.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*Children* begins with a terrorist bombing.



A military-operated checkpoint in *Legend* where the "healthy" are separated from the "infected."



*Children*: Theo enters his job at the Ministry of Energy through a metal detector.

## *Children of Men* and *I Am Legend*: the disaster-capitalism complex hits Hollywood

by [Kirk Boyle](#)

"Our culture of calamity has critical implications for the emergence of the disaster-security state and the consolidation of corporate power in the age of globalization." — Kevin Rozario

Like many of the critics who praised Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* for being one of the best films of 2006, I found the film a topical post-apocalyptic treatise on a variety of contemporary political problems, from the "War on Terror" to environmental degradation. However, I did not fully grasp *Children*'s political significance until I viewed another dystopian science fiction film released the following year, Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend*. The formal similarities of these two films accentuate a stark contrast in how each represents a world shaped by the Anglo-American neoconservative movement. *Legend* propagandizes for what *Children* condemns — the neoconservative combination of religious and market fundamentalism with an aggressive foreign policy, a political economic agenda that journalist and activist Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism."

A comparative analysis of *Children* and *Legend* provides a glimpse into the political stakes of cultural representations of neoconservatism. To discern these stakes, I read *Children* through the lens of *Legend*'s ideological intentions — religious, economic, and geopolitical. The first section examines the metaphysics of each film. Characteristic of neoconservative ideology, *Legend* offers the moral palliatives of Christianity to allay and even justify the dubious workings of disaster capitalism. Despite its religious allusions, *Children* presents a materialist worldview not ordained by the heavens. In the second and third sections, I contrast *Legend*'s utopian fantasy of late capitalism with *Children*'s dystopian vision. Although "green zone" and "red zone" refer to fortified and unsecured areas of Baghdad, these terms resonate with meanings that exceed military objectives in Iraq. *Legend* favorably depicts the winners of neoliberalization — those gated in the globe's green zones — while *Children* identifies with those suffering in the red zones, the majority of the world's population who are losing out in an age of unfettered capitalism. I conclude my comparative analysis by drawing on the work of two prominent social theorists whose intellectual interests dovetail with Cuarón's aesthetic concerns, Klein and Slavoj Žižek, a

cultural critic of postmodernity. I use their work to illustrate how *Children* and *Legend* represent political space in diametrically opposed ways.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]



Background graffiti reads, “The Human Project Lives.”



*Legend*: Decorated with U.S. Army ribbons, Neville evacuates his family from Manhattan in an early flashback scene.



Neville’s blackness can be viewed from the skewed perspective of white Christian Americans as extra justification for violence against “other others” (like Arabs).

## The Alpha and Omega Man

*Children* takes place in London in 2027, eighteen years after a pandemic of infertility renders humankind unable to produce offspring. In the face of impending extinction, Theo Faron (Clive Owen), a white, middle-aged bureaucrat, helps Kee (Claire-Hope Ashitey), a black, inexplicably pregnant refugee, rendezvous with the *Tomorrow*, a ship belonging to the Human Project. Although Theo cannot be sure that the Human Project exists, he gives up his life to escort Kee and her newborn to be rescued by this group of the world’s “brightest minds” and “wise men doctors” working on a cure in the Azores.

Set in New York in 2012, *I Am Legend* takes place three years after 90% of the world’s population dies due to the lethal mutation of a genetically-engineered virus. The virus, which initially cured cancer, transforms another 9% of the population into “dark seekers,” vampiric zombies who then “killed and fed on” the 1% with immunity (about twelve million people). Only one middle-aged man has supposedly survived the double-catastrophe of plague and monster invasion, Robert Neville (Will Smith), an African American Lieutenant Colonel of the U.S. army and virologist, who spends his days at “Ground Zero” searching for a cure. When Neville produces a vaccine, he sacrifices himself so that two other recently discovered survivors, Anna (Alice Braga) and a young boy named Ethan (Charlie Tahan), can escape with it to a survivor’s colony in Bethel, Vermont.

Both films are thus set in major Western cities in the near future with main characters who pay the ultimate price hoping to reverse the catastrophic effects of a pandemic that (incidentally) struck in 2009. In a genre prone to religious allegory like end-of-times science fiction, these sacrifices carry Christ-like significance. Released on Christmas Day in the United States, *Children* doubles as a nativity story with Theo playing Joseph to Kee’s Mary after she reveals her pregnancy to him in a barn. Kee’s baby Dylan, like Christ, provides hope of a redeemed future for mankind, while the resistance movement that spearheads Kee’s flight to the coast fittingly calls itself the “Fishes.” The stigmata wounds Theo suffers — his cut foot and gunshot wound in the side — signify that he also plays Christ. The extra-diegetic effect of John Tavener’s accompaniment music, “Fragments of a Prayer,” bolsters a religious reading of *Children* by supplying a spiritual gravity to key moments throughout the film.

I problematize reading *Children* as a religious allegory at the end of this section. For now, I turn to *Legend* (also released during the Christmas season) to raise the political implications of its Christ figure.[2] *Legend*’s final fifteen minutes quilt together the film’s scrambled Christian allusions (a New York permanently decorated for Christmas, Neville’s hanging on the third day of the film, a cross dangling from the rearview mirror of Anna’s SUV, etc.), and assure the film’s status as Christian allegory. In the penultimate scene when the dark seekers attack, Neville, Anna, and Ethan convert a walled-in space of his lab into a panic room. Neville typically uses this enclosure to secure infected subjects that he has





*Children argues that hope for the future lies with the wretched of the earth.*



*Kee, the first pregnant woman in eighteen years, is a Third World refugee. Before she reveals her pregnancy to Theo, she empathizes with the plight of livestock.*



*Legend's New York City permanently decorated for Christmas.*

captured for his vaccination tests. When the three of them enter, to their surprise they discover that his latest “human trial” has succeeded. As the leader of the dark seekers unrelentingly rams his body into the enclosure’s heavy glass doors, Neville tries to reason with him. Neville pleads:

"Stop, stop, stop. Look, I can save you. I can save — I can help you. You are sick, and I can help you...I can fix this. I can save everybody...Let me save you! Let me save you!"

Neville’s use of the word “save” instead of “heal” or “cure” represents a slip from medical to ecclesiastical discourse. “Everybody” literally refers to the victims infected with the Krippen Virus (KV), but as a double entendre means mankind in general.[3] If read metaphorically, Neville’s plea implies that everyone, including the dark seekers, are Christian sinners in need of salvation.

I find the shift in addressee from “you” to “everybody” all the more striking because of Neville’s consistent treatment of the dark seekers as wholly other. For example, earlier in the film, Neville records an audio “behavioral note”:

"An infected male exposed himself to sunlight today. Now it’s possible decreased brain function or growing scarcity of food is causing them to...ignore their basic survival instincts. Social de-evolution appears complete. Typical human behavior is now entirely absent."

If Neville believes that the infected are no longer human, that they are different from humans not by degree but by kind, to put it in evolutionary terms, then he would not use the all-inclusive “everybody” to refer to his attackers. He would continue to use the objective pronoun “you,” which clearly differentiates the infected from the immune. The abrupt pronoun change announces a discursive shift in his rhetoric from science to religion.

Such nitpicky attention to linguistic detail might be insignificant in and of itself; however, the next scene indicates that Christ may very well return as a military scientist. As the “irrational” leader of the dark seekers continues battering the doors, Neville draws a vial of blood from the cured subject, shuffles Anna and Ethan into a coal chute, and gives her the vial. He says, “Anna, I think this is why you’re here.” She asks, “What are you doing?” He responds, “I’m listening.” In prior arguments between the two, Neville denies that there is a survivor’s colony (“There’s no survivor’s colony. There’s no safe zone.”), and he rejects that God is responsible for the outbreak of KV (“God didn’t do this, Anna. We did.”). The line “I’m listening” concedes to Anna that she has been right about the etiology of the plague and the existence of a colony. The key scene occurs right before the dark seekers attack:

"Anna: Come with us, Neville...to the colony.

Neville: There’s no colony, Anna. Everything just fell apart. There was no evacuation plan...



A crucifix swings from the rearview mirror of Anna's SUV.



Where Anna refers to the test subject as "she," Neville says "it."



Evidence of Neville's reckless treatment of the dark seekers lines the walls of his lab, as Anna discovers.



Legend eroticizes Neville in the tradition of some depictions of Christ

Anna: You're wrong. There is a colony. I know, okay?

Neville: How do you know, Anna?

Anna: I just know.

Neville: How? I said, how do you know? How could you know?

Anna: God told me. He has a plan.

Neville: God told you?

Anna: Yes.

Neville: *The* God?

Anna: Yes...I know how this sounds...

Neville: It sounds crazy.

Anna: But something told me to turn on the radio. Something told me to come here.

Neville: My voice on the radio told you to come here, Anna.

Anna: You were trying to kill yourself last night, right?

Neville: Anna —

Anna: And I got here just in time to save your life. You think it's just a coincidence?

Neville: Stop...just stop.

Anna: He must have sent me here for a reason. The world is quieter now. We just have to listen. If we listen, we can hear God's plan.

Neville: God's plan?

Anna: Yeah."

When Neville hands Anna the vaccinated blood in the coal chute and tells her, "I'm listening," he confirms that "*the* God" directed her to listen to his radio broadcast, remain at the seaport to save him, and take the cure to the survivor's colony.[4] In other words, he believes that he, too, has a role in God's plan, a teleology that up to this point was revealed to Anna alone. When Neville "listens," he accepts that he must sacrifice himself for the future of humanity. Accordingly, he pulls the pin of a grenade and runs at the dark seekers, transforming himself from skeptical scientist to savior-cum-suicide bomber.[5]

The film uses butterfly imagery to "objectively" buttress Anna's "crazy" belief that divine reason undergirds all events, however coincidental they may appear to the theologically tone-deaf. Neville only converts after witnessing cracks in the glass doors form the shape of a butterfly, an image that leads him to recall his deceased child Marley's (Willow Smith) words, "Look Daddy, a butterfly." When he turns to Anna and Ethan, he spies a butterfly tattoo on her neck. This coincidental appearance of butterflies brings to mind a series of them throughout the film, especially the butterfly spray-painted on a tank from the opening sequence that reads, "God Still Loves Us." [6]

The repeated image of the butterfly may well refer to the "butterfly effect" in chaos theory, a branch of physics devoted to studying the minutia of causal relations within nonlinear dynamical systems ("Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?"). Where films like



on the cross.



"God told me. He has a plan."



Anna hands the vaccinated blood to someone at the survivor's colony. *Legend's* focus on blood recalls Christological and nationalistic themes.



When Neville "listens," he becomes a suicide bomber.



*Red* (1994) and *Run Lola Run* (1998) appropriate chaos theory to tell stories about characters caught in intricate webs of causation, *Legend* deploys the "butterfly effect" to insist that the apparently random events surrounding Neville's life are *divinely* determined.[7] The film incorporates a modern worldview based on contingency, but within a premodern teleology, much like a creationist museum diorama exhibits animatronic dinosaurs living side-by-side with Adam and Eve.[7b]

By combining religion "with the latest findings of science," *Legend* exhibits one of the defining characteristics of fundamentalism. As Žižek points out,

"For fundamentalists, religious statements and scientific statements belong to the same modality of positive knowledge" (Žižek 2006b: 117).

Because fundamentalists regard their beliefs as knowledge, they can justify any act, however horrific, as divinely sanctioned. Moreover, the fundamentalist conflation of belief with positivistic knowledge imperils the status of belief (an ironic inversion of the traditional fear that science undermines religion). Without beliefs in Enlightenment principles like universal human rights, the benefits of knowledge — clean water, health services, modern technologies, disaster mitigation — evade members of so-called "less developed countries," whose rights we are no longer able to recognize. Without *belief* in these rights, we act as if we *know* these people are not fully "human" (just like Neville dehumanizes his test subjects and, as we shall see, the British government treats refugees in *Children*).

A skeptic might contest that the butterflies are a figment of Neville's imagination, not fundamentalist "proof" of divine providence. Anna may believe and Neville may convert, but they could also be delusional. The coda that follows Neville's fade-to-white sacrificial explosion, however, confirms that a Christian teleology based on fundamentalist "knowledge" structures the world of *Legend*.

In this coda scene, Anna and Ethan drive through a picture perfect autumn landscape, replete with blue skies and colorful foliage, until they arrive in Bethel ("House of God") where they discover the survivor's colony. Because our previous knowledge of the colony's existence comes solely from Anna's divination, its actual existence means that we are witnessing a prophecy realized. Tellingly, the point of view passes from Neville to Anna in this scene, shifting from the subjectivity of a skeptic to the objectivity of a fundamentalist. Anna, the audience is asked to believe, is not a traumatized survivor suffering from supernatural delusions; God has truly spoken to her and sent Neville, as Christ, to die for her.

As if the brute reality of the colony's existence were not confirmation enough, Anna's narration drives home the point that contingency has no place in the world of *Legend*:

"In 2009, a deadly virus burned through our civilization, pushing humankind to the edge of extinction. Dr. Robert Neville dedicated his life to the discovery of a cure, and the restoration of humanity. On September 9th, 2012 at approximately 8:49 p.m., he discovered that cure. And at 8:52

Cracks in the glass form the image of a butterfly.



Legend: "God Still Loves Us."

he gave his life to defend it. We are his legacy. This is his legend."

Anna's closing remarks sound like a military eulogy (a point I address later), but they also act as gospel, retroactively codifying Neville's life as Christological. Like Neo (Keanu Reeves) in *The Matrix* (1999), Neville fulfills his role as chosen one to restore humanity to its prelapsarian state. In true romantic fashion, the salvation of an individual doubles as the salvation of humanity.[8] All survivors, infected and immune alike, become part of Neville's story as he transfigures into the primordial father figure of "reborn" humankind. Anna, Ethan, and the rest of civilization owe him their existence; they are his legacy.

The debt implicit within the lines, "We are his legacy. This is his legend," becomes clear in Anna's last line, which serves as the film's final word. After a cut to black, Anna stage whispers, "Light up the darkness." With a total absence of referents on the screen, this line can only be interpreted as an injunction addressed to the audience. Not only are Anna, Ethan, and the rest of civilization within the film Neville's legacy, we the moviegoers are, too. To pay our metaphysical debt to Neville, we must "light up the darkness." In other words, Anna commands us to convert non-believing "dark seekers" to Christianity. Her disembodied voice delivers the inverse message of Sofia's (Penélope Cruz) opening line in Alejandro Amenabár's film *Abre los ojos* (1997). The theologically-laden "light up the darkness" inverts the Enlightenment imagery of "open your eyes."

To each film's credit, *Legend* and *Children* stage a discussion of the antagonism between the worldviews of antiquity and modernity. *Children*'s response to this discussion implies a significantly different ideological commitment than the fundamentalist one found in *Legend*. Although infused with religious themes, *Children* defends the secular principles of the Enlightenment.[9] Two scenes from the DVD chapter titled "Faith and Chance" show how *Children*'s treatment of Christianity contrasts with *Legend*'s.

A line by Jasper (Michael Caine), Theo's aging hippie friend and retired political cartoonist, precedes the first scene. Jasper proclaims,

"Kee, your baby is the miracle the whole world's been waiting for. Shanti, Shanti, Shanti."

Jasper likens Kee's baby to Jesus, and the Eastern religious peace offering works to denote a theological meaning to his proclamation. The next scene, in which Theo questions Kee about her pregnancy, juxtaposes this religious setup.

"Theo: Who's the father?

Kee: Whiffet. I'm a virgin.

Theo: ...Sorry?

Kee: Cha, be wicked, eh?

Theo: Yeah, it would.

Kee: Fuck knows. I don't know most of the wankers' names."



Children: Theo looks puzzled when Kee claims to be a virgin.

This scene ironizes a religious allegorical reading of the film, and it thwarts the temptation to draw parallels between Kee and Theo's



Kee to Theo: "Gotcha."



The Human Project arrives on their vessel, the Tomorrow. Theo gives his life to row Kee out to meet this ghostly ship.



Theo eavesdrops while Jasper explains the dialectical relationship between faith and chance.

adventure and the nativity. More importantly, it depicts the film's protagonist succumbing to this exact temptation. A slight beat follows Kee's false declaration of virginity in which Theo considers her baby as immaculately conceived. After he says, "Sorry," Kee laughs and points at him to signal that he has fallen for her prank. Her child may be a miracle, but Dylan is certainly not the second coming.[10]

The jocular atmosphere of this scene conceals a serious point about Theo's belief structure and its relation to the film's ontology. Theo's character has a trajectory that opposes Neville's. Whereas Neville moves from disbelief to faith in a plan God has laid out for him, Theo develops from gullible believer to existential hero, to someone who courageously acts without any metaphysical guarantees. Like Neville, Theo believes but he anchors his "faith" in this world and not the next. He takes responsibility for helping Kee reach a *human* project spearheaded by a group of scientists. Theo's belief in his duty to Kee, her baby, and humanity is thus ultimately self-imposed.

Theo and Kee's secular belief rejects the dualistic ontology proffered by *Legend*, in which acts in this world are ultimately dictated by another. Instead, *Children* supports a monistic ontology ("the world is all that is the case").[11] Although monistic, the film's conception of being is not naturalistic — where humans, like everything else in the universe, are determined by cosmic forces beyond their control (the environment, the laws of physics, genetics, etc.) — but dialectical: Theo et al. do not choose the context within which they must act, but their actions shape the trajectory of history.

The scene that follows Kee's practical joke confirms the dialectical nature of the film's ontology. While smoking pot, Jasper waxes philosophical on the "mythical cosmic battle between faith and chance" to Miriam (Pam Ferris), a former midwife and Kee's caretaker.

"Jasper: So, you've got faith over here, right, and chance over there.

Miriam: Like yin and yang.

Jasper: Sort of.

Miriam: Or Shiva and Shakti.

Jasper: Lennon and McCartney. <laughter>

Kee: Look, Julian and Theo. <Kee indicates a photograph>

Jasper: Yeah, there you go. Julian and Theo met among a million protestors in a rally by chance. But they were there because of what they believed in in the first place, their faith. They wanted to change the world. And their faith kept them together. But by chance, Dylan was born... Their faith put in praxis...

Miriam: Praxis? What happened?

Jasper: Chance. He was their sweet little dream. He had little hands, little legs, little feet. Little lungs. And in 2008, along came the flu pandemic. And then, by chance, he was gone.

Miriam: Oh, Jesus.

Jasper: You see, Theo's faith lost out to chance. So, why bother if life's going to make its own choices?

Miriam: Oh, boy. That's terrible. But, you know, everything happens for a reason.





In *Legend*, even the wildlife affirms the necessary social glue of “family values.”

Jasper: That I don’t know. But Theo and Julian would always bring Dylan. He loved it here.”

This scene demonstrates a crucial difference in the two primary characters’ belief systems. Miriam is New Ageist. She meditates, prays in a mix of creeds like an omnist, and believes in a universe guided by conflicting binary forces (like premodern cosmologies which pit a masculine against a feminine principle). As an aged hippie, Jasper and his supposed witnessing of a UFO — a story Miriam shows extreme interest in hearing — does not appear to offer much of an alternative. Yet, Jasper distances himself from Miriam’s fundamentalist “knowledge” by joking (equating the profane couple Lennon and McCartney with the sacred couple Shiva and Shakti) and, more importantly, by responding to Miriam’s teleological belief that “everything happens for a reason” with skepticism. (That “everything happens for a reason” is the same teleological belief that structures the world of *Legend*.) Indeed, it would be a mistake to read Jasper’s discourse on faith and chance in the mythical, cosmic terms that he uses to introduce it. In the above scene, Jasper affirms a dialectical ontology that is at odds with Christian, New Ageist, and naturalistic worldviews.

Jasper supports a dialectical ontology by giving Dylan the paradoxical status of an object of both faith and chance. Theo and Julian’s child operates as a chance event *and* the outcome of “their faith put into praxis.” Contingency rules his conception as Julian’s pregnancy is unplanned. Faith enters when Theo and Julian *retroactively take responsibility* for him, when they make him “their sweet little dream.” According to Jasper, faith involves taking responsibility for contingent events, not affirming some divine plan.[12] Likewise, Theo and Julian meeting among a throng of protestors is a chance event, but their reason for being at the rally and for becoming a couple is governed by something more than chance, by their belief that they can change the world. As Marx famously explained:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 2000: 329).

Acting to change contingent circumstances forms the basis of a dialectical ontology, of which *Children* exemplifies and *Legend* lacks. While Theo struggles under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past, Neville saves the world under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from “the God.”

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

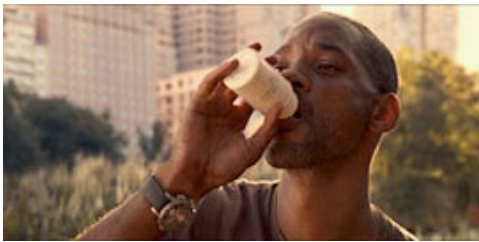


# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



*Children*: the accoutrements of the Last Men.



*Legend*: Theo's drug abuse is par for the course, but Neville's is deviant and leads to a brush with death. The former provides social commentary, the latter a dose of morality.



*Children*: A deportation bus travels through a Homeland Security checkpoint.

The fact that *Legend* is a Christian allegory does not make it inimical to a leftist understanding of catastrophe and the cultural representations catastrophe inspires. An apocalyptic film need not be an opiate for the masses. Read exclusively as a Christian allegory, *Legend* merely develops one strain of the scrambled allegorical code of its cinematic predecessor, *The Omega Man* (1971). Where Charlton Heston performs Christ part-time in *The Omega Man*, Will Smith plays Christ from alpha to omega.

*Legend* should be of concern for leftists not because of its religiosity per se, but for its marriage of fundamentalist Christianity with neoconservatism.[13][[open endnotes in new window](#)] David Harvey argues that neoconservatives seek “social control through construction of a climate of consent around a coherent set of moral values,” “order as an answer to the chaos of individual interests,” and “an overweening morality as the necessary social glue to keep the body politic secure in the face of external and internal dangers” (Harvey 2005: 84, 82). *Legend* constructs a climate of consent around a coherent set of moral values (“Light up the darkness”), and the film’s fundamentalism assures its viewers that providence orders the world, including its external and internal dangers.

### The Last Men on Earth

Neoconservatives concern themselves with consent, order, and morality to counteract the chaos created by neoliberalism, today’s political doctrine of unfettered capitalism. The confluence of Christianity and neoconservatism cannot be properly understood without reference to neoliberalism as a political economic ideology. As David Harvey writes, neoconservatives

“in no way depart from the neoliberal agenda of construction or restoration of a dominant class power” (Harvey 2005: 83).

Because neoconservatism cannot be divorced from neoliberalism, we must address *Children*’s and *Legend*’s divergent responses to late capitalism before exploring how the two films culturally imagine our current political constellation. In this section, I argue that *Children* contests the neoliberal ideology that *Legend* upholds.

Ostensibly, *Children* and *Legend* say very little about contemporary capitalism. Since the catastrophes in each film are not economic in origin, a straightforward Marxist allegory is not possible. Christological allegories aside, we simply do not know who or what is ultimately responsible for jump starting the end of the world. The characters in *Children* discuss possible theories about what caused the infertility but none are verified. The culprit of the mutated virus in *Legend* is also unclear. Even as *Legend* depicts the plague as a biblical flood redux, it suggests that humans are at fault for tampering with Nature/God’s creation. If humanity is culpable, did the government or the private sector fund the genetic modification of the measles virus? Each film withholds whether its disaster’s etiology is natural or artificial, corporate or national, collective or individual.

Yet, in this indirect treatment of the origin of a mega-disaster lies the key to



Bexhill refugee camp in the distance.



Anamorphic gaze of Abu Ghraib.



Recreated Hamas funeral demonstration.



Anti-Iraq War collage in Jasper's house.

each film's "political unconscious." That is to say, the capitalist world-economy operates as the *absent cause* that structures these two science fiction films. The disaster scenario, whether it be mass infertility or a mutated virus, displaces or stands in for neoliberal late capitalism. As Fredric Jameson writes,

"all the cataclysmic violence of the science-fiction narrative — the toppling buildings, the monsters rising out of Tokyo Bay, the state of siege or martial law — is but a pretext, which serves to divert the mind from its deepest operations and fantasies, and to motivate those fantasies themselves" (Jameson 1988: 15).

In a distorted manner, the cataclysmic violence of *Children* and *Legend* expresses a fantasmatic response to living in the "real" historical world that produced these two films. The disaster scenario, to put it succinctly, harbors the films' ideological commitments.

The imagined worlds of *Children* and *Legend* represent two very different fantasmatic/ ideological responses to living in the "real world" of unfettered capitalism. *Children* criticizes the "sterile hedonism" of late capitalist consumers who live in a society ruled strictly by the pleasure principle. The film is not "about infertility as a biological problem," as Žižek writes:

"The infertility Cuarón's film is about was diagnosed long ago by Friedrich Nietzsche, when he perceived how Western civilization is moving in the direction of the Last Man, an apathetic creature with no great passion or commitment: unable to dream, tired of life, he takes no risks, seeking only comfort and security, an expression of tolerance with one another: 'A little poison now and then: that makes for pleasant dreams. And much poison at the end for a pleasant death. They have their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night, but they have a regard for health. 'We have discovered happiness,' — say the Last Men, and they blink.'" (Žižek 2006c: unpaginated)

The Bell's whiskey that Theo drinks, the "Strawberry Cough" that Jasper smokes, and the masterpieces that Theo's wealthy cousin Nigel (Danny Huston) collects represent the trivial daily pleasures of the Last Men. The government-issued Quietus suicide kit serves as the greater dose of poison "at the end for a pleasant death." In such a world, cynicism replaces belief in large, consequential projects as Theo, "the rebel with a lost cause," demonstrates:

"Even if [the Human Project] discovered the cure for infertility, it doesn't matter. Too late. The world went to shit. You know what? It was too late before the infertility thing happened, for fuck's sake."

Universal infertility could be blamed for creating an environment conducive to cynicism because it functions as a deterministic force beyond anyone's control. However, Theo exhibits a cynicism towards the world *before* "the infertility thing happened," the world of late capitalism. When Theo questions how Nigel manages to collect art when not even "one sad fuck" will be around to look at it in one hundred years, Nigel's response epitomizes how cynicism functions as an ideology that buttresses capitalism: "I just don't think about it." *Children* depicts the Nigels of the world not as the victims of a natural disaster, but as the perpetrators of a manmade one.

Mise-en-scène plays a crucial role in depicting capitalism as the absent cause of *Children*'s disaster-world. Cuarón explains his technique:

"We used the cameras in the same principle as in *Y Tu Mamá*



[También]...we decided social environment is as important as character, so you don't favor one over the other. That means going loose and wide. The camera doesn't do close-ups. Rather than make tension between the character and the environment, you make the character blend in with the environment." (Busack 2007: unpaginated)

The blending of characters and environment is a highly ambivalent technique, politically speaking. Émile Zola and Theodore Dreiser experimented with treating people with the same import as objects in their fiction, but in an ideological way that naturalized late nineteenth-century capitalist reification. Cuarón uses this technique to ensure that the ultimate truth of his film will be social and not naturalistic or psychological. The meaning of *Children* cannot be reduced to the redemption of a self-medicated bureaucrat. Rather, Cuarón focuses a critical eye on “real world” social crises by foregrounding *Children*’s background. In its backdrops, the film achieves a kind of slow motion montage-effect: by yoking together images of seemingly disconnected crises over the course of 109 minutes (images of globalization, immigration, inequity, environmental degradation, permanent states of emergency, politics of fear, surveillance society, terrorism, and ghettos), Cuarón argues for their dialectical relationship. Crises that appear as disjointed liberal talking points turn into a web of related issues tied to a larger problem: capital.



Legend's New York City three years after the outbreak — panoramic shot



New York City three years after the outbreak — street level shot.



Cars in *Children* are not being sold to the audience.

*Children*’s systemic analysis would not be as effective if these social crises were treated forthrightly. In direct treatments of disaster — like the documentary “The Possibility of Hope,” a bonus feature from the DVD version of *Children* that “examines how society may be headed toward the ill-fated world represented in the film” — the presentation fails miserably (the message gets lost, the audience’s interest wanes, the argument triggers familiar ideological antagonists who dismiss it out of hand, etc.). This failure explains why, for Žižek, the art of the film lies in

“the paradox of anamorphosis: if you look at the thing too directly, the oppressive social dimension, you don’t see it. You can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background” (Žižek 2006a: unpaginated).

Anamorphic images, like *Children*’s shots of the oppressive social dimension, appear distorted; only an unconventional view of them yields their accurate form and meaning. *Children* compels us to look away to perceive not just the characters’ implication in this oppressive social dimension but our own.

An example of Cuarón’s anamorphic technique occurs when Theo, Kee, and Miriam “break into prison” so they can reach the coast to rendezvous with the Human Project ship. When they arrive at the city-sized internment camp of Bexhill on a UK Homeland Security bus, it stops at a checkpoint. Through the bus windows we see detained Arab men being tortured in poses reminiscent of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. If the camera left the bus at this point to focus on the infamous hooded prisoner from Abu Ghraib, the effect would be propagandistic. Instead, Cuarón distances the oppressive “real world” social dimension by placing it in the background. The abused foreigners glimpsed through the windows operate as historical context, as a history of the present where today’s divisions persist in a future dystopian England. Now, and in this imagined future, “more developed countries” neutralize the perceived and real threats of “less developed countries” in order to acquire and secure resources for their wealthy economies. As Cuarón states,

“We didn’t want to do a future that was about the future — but about the present” (“Interview” 2006: unpaginated).

Cuarón achieves a future of the present through the cumulative effect of foregrounded backgrounds like the reenactment of Abu Ghraib. Strategically placed homeland security signs, a recreated Hamas funeral demonstration, and paraphernalia against the Iraq War and the Bush and Blair administrations create a *mise-en-scène* of the War on Terror.[14] Over the course of the film, these images link together to provide a coherent narrative of globalization and its discontents.



Neville uses the USS Intrepid aircraft carrier as a driving range.

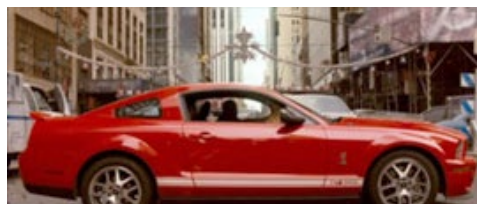
*Legend* begins with panoramic and bird's-eye-view shots to establish that New York City was abandoned in a hurry and has since fallen into disrepair. A music-less soundtrack of animal calls suggests that whoever lives here no longer makes their home in a concrete jungle but a real one. A roaring red car streaks down an empty street interrupting the tranquility of the post-apocalyptic landscape. The potential for the scene to initiate a critical dialectic between environment and character quickly dissolves into a car commercial. Lawrence intersperses a series of close-ups of Neville and his German Shepherd co-star, Sam, with ones of the car, which we discover is not just any automobile but Ford's Shelby Cobra Mustang GT500. Neville and Sam (short for Samantha but also recalls "Uncle Sam") use the red sports car to hunt deer. The film dedicates minutes of screen time to the car accelerating, making tire-squealing turns, spinning out gracefully, and stopping on a dime.[15]



Neville cruises down the street hunting for deer.



Sam enjoys the ride.



Introducing Ford's Shelby Cobra Mustang GT500.



Car commercial close-up of the GT 500.



Neville picks corn in Central Park.

Close-ups consume the scene of their unsuccessful hunt, precisely the shots which Cuarón avoids so he can emphasize social environment. Like *Children*, *Legend* blends its characters into an environment, but this environment is not the "real" post-9/11 world but the pure fantasy space of neoliberal capitalism. Since Neville lives in a megalopolis full of commodities and bereft of people, he enjoys the fruits of capital without incurring debt. He lives in a world of pure surplus enjoyment. His duties to find a cure and broadcast to potential survivors aside, Neville spends his days partaking in the leisure activities of an outdoorsman — he hunts, fishes, golfs, and plays with his dog. In addition, he finds time to work out, watch old television shows, listen to Bob Marley on his iPod, "rent" videos, and rescue famous paintings (just like Nigel). In nearly every respect, Neville's life fits the bill of Nietzsche's Last Men.[16]





*Legend's* Last Man: Neville fishes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and ...



... collects Van Goghs during end times.



*Children's* Last Men: Nigel spends humanity's last days rescuing Michelangelos...



...and Picassos.



In the future, militants will occupy Cincinnati.



Billboard for XM Satellite Radio, which has since merged with Sirius Satellite Radio.

In addition to indulging the fantasies of late capitalist consumers, *Legend* targets its audience with “anamorphic advertising.” Lawrence replaces Cuarón’s background commentary on forced migrations and terrorism — newspaper clips that read, “Refugees Blamed for Increase in Terror Attacks” and “Immigrants Protest Against Government New Racist Policies” — with identifiable storefronts, billboards, and products. The “hyper-commercialization” of Hollywood is not a new phenomenon. Product placements, tie-ins, merchandising, and cross-promotions have proliferated in the age of media conglomeration to the point where younger generations no longer experience them as baleful, let alone disruptive. That the Shelby Mustang is clearly the choice of the post-apocalyptic sportsman — along with the Ford Explorer and Escape Hybrid — will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with this latest version of the culture industry.

Nonetheless, *Children* makes *Legend's* participation in these dubious marketing trends look egregious. Brandchannel.com lists thirty-two corporate brands that appear in *Legend* (on average, a new one every three minutes) while *Children* features “almost zero brands” (Sauer 2007: unpaginated).[17] Beyond the quantity of ads lies an issue of quality. Where *Children* harnesses the political potentials of anamorphosis — especially in scenes where anamorphic advertisements of invented products ironize the consumerism of late capitalism — *Legend* exploits the same artful techniques to peddle products and promote corporate brand recognition.[18] Most disturbing of all, Lawrence uses anamorphosis to naturalize the corporate structure of neoliberal capitalism. Signs of multinational corporations litter the backgrounds of *Legend*. A mega-disaster has destroyed the signs’ referents within the film’s diegesis, but their spectral presence sends the subliminal message to an early twenty-first century audience that corporate capitalism is all but indestructible. The first few minutes of *Legend* where Neville’s Shelby zips past strategically placed advertisements for XM Satellite Radio, Staples, and Hyatt, assure us that the

world is more likely to end before capitalism does.

One final indication that *Legend* cuts ties with reality in order to enact a consumerist fantasy stems from what *Popular Mechanics* calls the “junk science” of the film. *Popular Mechanics*’ assistant editor Erin McCarthy consulted

“experts in the fields of structural engineering, virology, and wildlife to determine what could happen — and what certainly won’t happen” regarding *Legend*’s portrait of the future (McCarthy 2007: 1).



*Legend* even includes fake viral marketing. Although Warner Bros., which released *Legend*, has no plans to release a *Batman/Superman* movie on May 15, 2010, they own the rights to both superheroes.



Satirical advertisements in *Children* criticize the “sterile hedonism” of the Last Men.

Pointing out the scientific inconsistencies of a film does not meet the criteria most moviegoers take to the theater, nor will it prove to be an ideological indicator in many cases. But as with *Legend*’s prevalent product placements, its “junk science” is symptomatic of a larger ideological problem. New York City would be in worse condition due to water and fire damage, and Neville would run into problems with powering his home that the film glosses over. Disbelief could be suspended if these vital infrastructural issues had not been ignored precisely because Neville exists in the fantasy space of a consumer and *not* a producer. In one representative scene, he harvests ears of corn in Central Park. That the corn is ripe is no accident. *Legend* cannot represent how the things Neville consumes were produced because labor does not exist in the consumerist fantasyland of the Last Men. Everything Neville needs or wants is simply there for the picking.

*Legend* creates a capitalist utopia by immersing its protagonist in a world that defies the laws of physics, a playground of consumer goods that hides the labor power of its construction and sustenance (and the problems that would inevitably plague its sole survivor). The film’s “anamorphic advertising” weaves its consuming public into this fantasy world to naturalize neoliberalism as if to say, “the world as we know it will never end, and we will always feel fine.”

Where *Legend* celebrates the Last Men and their late capitalist utopia, *Children* critiques their narcissism, cynicism, and classism (as soon will become apparent), by depicting their world — our world — as dystopian. With the dreamworld of wealth comes the catastrophe of crimes against humanity in the guise of free markets, illegal immigration, homeland security, and the War on Terror — all of the specious policies which Cuarón catalogues in his backdrops, the very same policies that Naomi Klein argues bankroll the well-orchestrated “disaster-capitalism complex.”

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

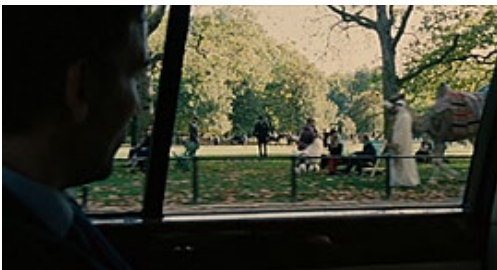
## I Am Conservative-Corporatist



Children's glimpse into the collective future of disaster apartheid.



The guarded entrance of the "green zone" in futuristic London.



The rich stroll through St. James' Park.

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein claims that the neoliberal era ushered in a "capitalist Reformation" that doubled as a counterrevolution to Keynesianism and Third World developmentalism (Klein 2007b: 53). Like Harvey, she views neoliberalism as a theory of political economic practices that seek to restore class power through deregulation, privatization, and cuts to social spending, a free-market trinity bent on redistributing wealth as much as generating it. Put into practice, neoliberalization morphs into corporatism, a vast collusion between Big Government and Big Business to transfer public wealth to private hands while an ever-widening chasm opens up between "the dazzling rich and the disposable poor" (Klein 2007b: 15). The recent \$700 billion financial bailout of banks by the U.S. government provides a clear example of this collusion.

Klein charts how the rise of corporatism spawned a disaster-capitalism complex that at once extends and supersedes the military-industrial (and congressional) complex President Eisenhower diagnosed in his 1961 farewell address. With the emergence of the disaster-capitalism complex, the latent "creative destruction" that fueled the engines of capital since its inception surges to the surface to become the recognized *modus operandi* of the economy. Today, crisis opportunism entwines superprofits with megadisasters to the point where

"all conflict- and disaster-related functions (waging war, securing borders, spying on citizens, rebuilding cities, treating traumatized soldiers) can be performed by corporations at a profit" (Klein 2007c: 50).

Although "disaster capitalism" has been part of neoliberal policy for over three decades, it did not develop into a full-scale complex until after 9/11 with the War on Terror. As Klein writes,

"Although the state goal was fighting terrorism, the effect was the creation of the disaster capitalism complex — a full-fledged new economy in homeland security, privatized war and disaster reconstruction tasked with nothing less than building and running a privatized security state, both at home and abroad" (Klein 2007b: 299).

Under the auspice of fighting terrorism, the disaster-capitalism complex insidiously developed into a fully articulated state-within-a-state, a corporate shadow-state, that carries out the normal functions of a nation-state but at a heftier price.

While the disaster-capitalism complex is not unprecedented — the fear was always that the military-industrial complex would wage wars for strictly monetary reasons — its emergence represents a new phase in globalization.



Klein points out,

“For decades, the conventional wisdom was that generalized mayhem was a drain on the global economy. Individual shocks and crises could be harnessed as leverage to force open new markets, of course, but after the initial shock had done its work, relative peace and stability were required for sustained economic growth” (Klein 2007b: 423).

The disaster-capitalism complex upturns this belief in political stability by thriving “in conditions of low-intensity grinding conflict” (Klein 2007b: 441). Worldwide wars on terrorism provide the perfect ruse for the disaster-capitalism complex, where

“the point is to create ‘security’ inside fortress states bolstered by endless low-level conflict outside their walls” (Klein 2007b: 441).

The next logical leap is to expand the market of the disaster-capitalism complex from war-torn and disaster-struck countries to everyday civilian life. Instead of building green zones to protect military operations, residential green zones are being built to shelter those who can afford them.

Klein envisions the endgame of this burgeoning complex as “a collective future of disaster apartheid” where the super-rich reside in the gated green zones of hyperserviced states completely segregated from the ultra-poor surplus people who struggle to survive in the red zones of failed states (Klein 2007c: 54). In this future corporatist dystopia, the world will be partitioned into the armored suburbs of contract, or stand-alone, cities on one side of the fence and a post-apocalyptic no-man’s-land of FEMA-villes on the other.[19][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

All of this is to say that Klein prophesizes the world Cuarón creates in *Children*. More accurately, Cuarón imagines Klein’s “collective future of disaster apartheid” by transposing the conflicts of recent history in places like Iraq, Palestine, Bosnia, Somalia, and Northern Ireland — his admitted references — to 2027 England. As Hurricane Katrina exposed a disaster apartheid already at work within the U.S., *Children* confirms that the future is now.

In one poignant scene, a Bentley chauffeurs Theo into the inner circle to see Nigel about obtaining transit papers. As “The Court of the Crimson King” plays, the car passes through Admiralty Arch, which is guarded by a troop of soldiers, two gates, two tanks, and a sentry tower. Inside The Mall, Theo witnesses the absurdity of the Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment parading down the street, and the Band of the Scots Guard performing “The Spirit of Pageantry” as the wealthy stroll through St. James’s Park with their pet zebras, poodles, and camels. After driving through another guarded checkpoint outside of the Ark of Art (Battersea Power Station), the Bentley drops off Theo inside where he must walk through a metal detector.

Nigel lives tucked away in this fortress for the super-rich with Picasso’s *Guernica* decorating the wall, attendants who serve multiple-course meals,



Burning bodies in the “red zone” of futuristic Bexhill.



The Uprising incites urban warfare that is reminiscent of the Iraq War.





Combat stops as the soldiers stare in awe at Kee's newborn.



A moment later, the fighting resumes.

and wine, pills, and video games at hand. This is “England as a Green Zone, a comfort zone,” as Cuarón puts it.

“[T]he characters feel they’re lucky to live there, but there’s a big percentage of outsiders waiting to get in” (Busack 2007: unpaginated).

In *Children* the state rounds up these outsiders and deports them to cordoned off areas on the opposite side of the green zone’s walls and fences. The crowded, chaotic, and grimy streets of Bexhill provide the film’s red zones. Here “the other half lives” in slums comprised of makeshift dwellings and ramshackle buildings as roadside garbage and corpses burn alike. Here the Fishes stage the “Uprising,” an insurrection against the state, which reveals that red zones often double as rubble-filled war zones when tensions erupt.

*Children* artfully illustrates the dialectical disparities between green and red zones that Klein theorizes, but only after *Legend* was released could the ideological stakes of filmic representations of the disaster-capitalism complex be grasped in their entirety. In the interests of detailing *Legend*’s allegiance to neoliberalism in the previous section, I ignored one important element of the film: the imminent threat posed by the dark seekers. These vampiric zombies represent the sole impediment to Neville’s consumerist freedom. When the sun sets, Neville must barricade himself in his Washington Square townhouse to prevent his becoming their next meal. In the first lockdown scene, Neville fastens a crossbar security lock on his front door and shuts seven windows outfitted with retractable steel doors. The montage-quick succession of this lockdown repeats later in the film as rolling steel doors and shutters close on another five windows. In this latter scene, we also witness the elaborate defense system Neville has installed in case of an emergency. Powerful lights form a perimeter around his fortress home to deter the photophobic vampires. Parked cars rigged with remote-controlled explosives provide a last line of defense.[20]

Essentially, *Legend* and *Children* represent the two faces of the disaster-capitalism complex but from opposing perspectives. *Children*’s red zone population of “fugees” and illegal immigrants mutate into *Legend*’s feral dark seekers, and its green zone population of ministers (Nigel) and bureaucrats (Theo) become Greenwich Village’s resident military scientist. These character transformations entail a shift in the audience’s empathy and point of identification. While the progression of Theo and Kee’s journey leads the audience to empathize with the plight of those barred from a privatized security state, the hellbent dark seekers who threaten Neville elicit empathy for his imperiled one-man gated community. While *Children* invites us to identify with those who are critical of the disaster-capitalism complex, *Legend* solicits the opposite allegiance with those orchestrating it.

The conflicting character loyalties in *Children* and *Legend* can be explained by their opposing conceptions of political space. To understand the films’ diametrical conceptions of political space, I refer to Žižek’s often cited example from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Structural Anthropology* of the spatial arrangement of buildings in the village of the Winnebago tribe. When asked to map their village, the Winnebago’s two sub-groups draw the ground-plan as a circle:



In *Legend*’s first lockdown scene, Neville shuts steel doors that cover the windows of his daughter’s former room.



God's eye view of Neville during the second lockdown scene.



Neville's last line of defense.



The relentless dark seekers climb the walls of Neville's Washington Square townhouse.



*Legend's* citation of *Shrek* includes dialogue about walls and resettlement areas, themes pertinent to the disaster-capitalism complex.

"...but for one sub-group, there is within this circle another circle of central houses, so that we have two concentric circles, while for the other sub-group, the circle is split into two by a clear dividing line. In other words, a member of the first sub-group (let us call it 'conservative-corporatist') perceives the ground-plan of the village as a ring of houses more or less symmetrically disposed around the central temple, whereas a member of the second ('revolutionary-antagonistic') sub-group perceives his/her village as two distinct heaps of houses separated by an invisible frontier....The central point of Lévi-Strauss is that this example should in no way entice us into cultural relativism, according to which the perception of social space depends on the observer's group-belonging: the very splitting into the two 'relative' perceptions implies a hidden reference to a constant — not the objective, 'actual' disposition of buildings but a traumatic kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were unable to symbolize, to account for, to 'internalize,' to come to terms with, an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole." (Žižek 2007: unpaginated)

Žižek reads Lévi-Strauss' story of the Winnebago tribe as an allegory of the difference between conservative and radical politics. Contrary to the typical social scientific understanding that locates Right and Left on two sides of a political spectrum, Žižek argues that the Right and Left view the political field in mutually exclusive ways. As he puts it, a Leftist and a Rightist

“not only occupy different places within the political space, each of them perceives differently the very disposition of the political space — a Leftist as the field that is inherently split by some fundamental antagonism, a Rightist as the organic unity of a Community disturbed only by foreign intruders” (Žižek 2007: unpaginated).

Leftists recognize an inherent imbalance in social relations (the map of a circle divided by an “invisible frontier”), which eludes Rightists who symbolically efface this imbalance (the map of two concentric circles). (As President George W. Bush said about his 2003 tax cut plan, “I understand the politics of economic stimulus. Some would like to turn this into class warfare. That's not how I think.”)

Instead of acknowledging what Leftists call the “class struggle,” Rightists displace the fundamental antagonism inherent within society to an antagonism between homeland and foreign intruder. Instead of the “invisible frontier” of the class struggle, Rightists perceive a “visible frontier” that divides society from an extrinsic agent who threatens to compromise the integrity of the organic community — Jews for fascists, blacks for white supremacists, Communists for U.S. cold warriors, “Welfare Queens” for Reaganites, terrorists and illegal immigrants for neoconservatives.

I contend that *Legend* and *Children* conceive of political space in an analogous way to the two sub-groups of the Winnebago tribe. Where the



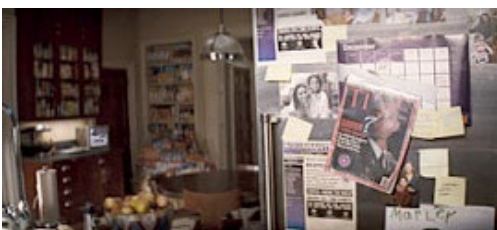
In reading *Legend* as an allegory of the War on Terror, the dark seekers play the part of jihadists (although all of them appear to be white).

conservative-corporatist *Legend* imagines a harmonious society vulnerable to external enemies, the revolutionary-antagonistic *Children* depicts a society at odds with itself, one internally divided by an “invisible frontier.” In *Legend*, Neville barricades himself within his townhouse. Encircling his green zone fortress is a Manhattan-sized red zone of abandoned buildings, each potentially occupied by vicious monsters who jeopardize his otherwise unbridled consumerism. In *Children*, “only Britain soldiers on” by viciously excluding foreigners. *Children*’s red zoners are not blood-sucking vampires, but refugees who suffer from a serious imbalance in social relations. They are *homo sacer*, Giorgio Agamben’s term for those whom the state refuses to recognize as political subjects. By detaining them in internment camps, the state strips them of their rights and reduces them to their biological existence (what Agamben calls “bare life”).

The different antagonisms each film envisions imply divergent solutions. In *Children*, salvation lies outside the green zones with those who do not enjoy capital returns and whose very exclusion makes possible the surplus enjoyment of the privileged. In *Legend*, when Neville gives his life to restore humanity, he becomes the source of salvation. These are two different species of salvation. In one, the underclasses and those class traitors who conspire with them save humanity. In the other, a military man saves humanity with the aid of an ethnic woman’s faith. Anna’s closing military-style eulogy praises Neville because “he gave his life to defend it,” “it” being an indefinite pronoun that refers to the cure but also brings to mind instances when the phrase applies to “country” or “nation.” Neville dies in the line of duty, a hero defending the homeland from infidels.

The ideological implications of Neville’s patriotism were not lost on one reviewer, Bob Mondello from NPR’s *All Things Considered*. In his rather gracious review, “*I Am Legend* a One-Man American Metaphor,” Mondello reads Lawrence’s film within the context of the fall 2007 season of “War-on-Terrorism, Rendition-for-Lambs-In-the-Valley-of-Elah movies”:

"I mean, it’s still a sci-fi blockbuster, but take a look at that plot: Western medicine takes a virus (a bad thing) and manipulates it so that it can fight cancer (a worse thing). Sort of like Western military forces arming jihadists (which they regard as a bad thing) so that they’ll fight communists (which they regard as a worse thing). And then the built-up virus — the bad thing — mutates into something much worse than the cancer, and it turns on its creators. And this starts where? That’s right: In New York, which everyone in the movie keeps calling Ground Zero. And some poor schmoe who didn’t start the problem has to try to fix it. But even if he comes up with a cure, a way to make the nasty infected guys human again, they’re just going to keep coming [as Neville echoes, ‘They’re not going to stop. They’re not going to stop.’], banging their heads against plate glass, destroying the civilized world and — here’s the kicker — either killing everyone they come into contact with or converting them into monsters just like themselves. And the only solution is to shoot them dead — or withdraw behind metal walls, into a fortress-like homeland. And that’s not working." (Mondello 2007: unpaginated)





“Savior? Soldier. Scientist.”



Anna and Ethan must pass through customs before gaining admittance into the survivor's colony.



What former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin might call the “real America.”



New Jerusalem for neoconservatives.



While I concur with Mondello's general political reading of the film, I find his characterization of Neville as a “poor schmo” suspect. Neville is not poor in any sense of the term, nor does Lawrence depict him as a schmo. In one scene, Neville opens his refrigerator to provide the audience with an anamorphic gaze at a *Time* magazine cover graced by his picture. The caption reads, “Savior, Soldier, Scientist.” Although Neville has appended a question mark, the shot establishes his place in a neoconservative movement that mollifies the detrimental effects of its disaster-capitalism complex by appealing to fundamentalist “knowledge.” In addition, the shot invites the audience to share in the mythos surrounding Neville's (and Smith's) public celebrity: surely a military man (and star Hollywood actor) who works in good faith can save us from the forces of evil.

I also question Mondello's claim that according to the film, fortressing the homeland fails as a viable policy for combating “Islamofascist” dark seekers. Although the terrorists successfully invade Neville's home, the walled-in fortress town that is the survivor's colony seems impenetrable. When Anna and Ethan reach its steel gates, a scanner system confirms that they are not infected, i.e. illegal immigrants. The gates open to two armed soldiers guarding an idyllic Small Town, U.S.A. The bells of a traditional white-steepled Protestant church ring while the stars and bars wave in the wind. A bird's-eye shot reveals that this privatized security state is a self-sustaining farm powered by wind turbines.

The linked images of soldiers, church, flag, defense walls, farm, and green technology provide a perfect dialectical image of the neoconservative utopian vision. In Bethel, apparent contradictions are reconciled. Under God, one nation lives indivisible, with liberty and justice for green zone residents only. A fundamentalist moral order integrates the latest scientific discoveries of the eco revolution. And dark seekers the world over are miraculously cured by a Eucharistic vaccine (and, of course, by the liberal democracy and free market capitalism spreading across the globe).

The 2008 DVD release of *Legend* confirmed the existence of an alternate ending in which Neville peacefully returns the uncured female test subject to the male leader of the dark seekers before safely escaping Manhattan with Anna and Ethan. In this ending, Neville apologizes for abducting the female test subject (and perhaps for attempting to “save” her), the butterfly imagery is profaned (the male leader uses it to identify his partner), and Bethel remains an off-screen hope instead of a reality. This nonviolent ending utterly alters the politics of the theatrical release.<sup>[21]</sup> Instead of a suicide bomber's sacrifice based on fundamentalist “knowledge” that leaves no room for belief in the human rights of the dark seekers, the alternative ending proposes a diplomatic resolution to the antagonism between two equal families. Although this ending is also ideological, it does not support the neoconservative agenda of stimulating the disaster-capitalism complex through aggressive foreign policy acts like preemptive wars.

The disparity between *Legend's* endings may tempt conspiracy theorists to speculate that an apparatchik in the Bush administration hijacked the film in post-production and instructed Warner Brothers to produce a “why we fight” conclusion for theaters. Klein suggests a more banal but no less evil explanation when she raises the specter of a disaster-capitalism-culture industry complex<sup>[22]</sup>.



The leader of the dark seekers. The film hints at but does not pursue his intelligence to avoid contradicting its neoconservative agenda.



At the end of *Children*, the boat separates Theo, Kee, and the baby from the oppressive social dimension, represented in the background by the flashing light of an airstrike.



Viva la Revolución!



Jesus and Lenin.

"The homeland-security sector is also becoming increasingly integrated with media corporations, a development that has Orwellian implications....The creeping expansion of the disaster-capitalism complex into the media may prove to be a new kind of corporate synergy, one building on the vertical integration that became so popular in the Nineties. It certainly makes sound business sense. The more panicked our societies become, convinced that there are terrorists lurking in every mosque, the higher the news ratings soar, the more biometric IDs and liquid-explosive-detection devices the complex sells, and the more high-tech fences it builds. If the dream of the open, borderless 'small planet' was the ticket to profits during the Clinton years, the nightmare of the menacing, fortified Western continents, under siege from jihadists and illegal immigrants, plays the same role in the new millennium." (Klein 2007c: 58)

The culture industry, Klein warns, is evolving. Beyond selling us products or even consumerism itself, films like *Legend* now push corporatism, that unholy "mutually supporting alliance between a police state and large corporations," which the neoconservative moment appropriates Christianity to help sanctify (Klein 2007b: 86). *Legend* may fail to induce panic or nightmares because its CGI villains are unconvincing (a popular criticism). Nevertheless, it delivers verbatim the chilling neoconservative agenda of a neoliberal utopia of unfettered disaster capitalism justified by the fundamentalist "knowledge" of an apocalyptic Christian teleology.

*Legend* and *Children* herald a new phase in disaster films, one related to what Gill Branston, in his reading of Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), calls "issue event blockbusters." [23] Instead of exploring the representability of a hot button political issue like climate change, however, *Legend* and *Children* operate as political allegories of the Anglo-American neoconservative moment. [24] If, as Ian Buchanan writes, "all texts are political allegories, symbolically working through and provisionally resolving a variety of social and cultural anxieties," then these two films do so with the social and cultural anxieties provoked by the disaster-capitalism complex (Buchanan 2006: 61). It is no exaggeration to say that *Legend* and *Children* could not resolve these anxieties more differently.

\*\*\*\*\*

Žižek applauds as a "solution" the floating boat at the end of *Children*, which he reads as a metaphor for cutting one's roots. Reminiscent of all emancipatory struggles, the boat represents the utopian moment of separation from an oppressive social dimension. *Children's* unmoored boat contrasts with Bethel, the literal shining city upon a hill in *Legend*. *Children* posits utopia as the desire for a radically different social order and the foray into the abyss to create it rather than a realized harmonious social order whose antagonistic sources have been eradicated.

Although the utopian moment is important, we should not forget to register the discipline, collective effort, and individual sacrifices that set the stage for this utopian moment. The foreground story of *Children* tells the story of a motley crew whose rejection of the unacceptable state of the



More Lenin .

present — its draconian immigration policies, xenophobic border controls, unwarranted military campaigns, inter- and intra-generational inequities, ecological deterioration, etc. — unites them to carry out the trying and sometimes dangerous work of bringing about an indeterminate, yet radically other future.

One scene in *Children*, in particular, represents the patient work of revolution. The scene titled “Reasonable Accommodations” on the DVD version takes us into a house of revolutionary-antagonists.[25] A gypsy woman named Marichka (Oana Pellea) — a variation of “Marina,” Russian for “sea” — leads Kee and Theo to a former bank whose residents now include an elderly Georgian couple. The couple feeds Theo and Kee and provides them a much needed respite in their apartment decorated with Byzantine icons of Christ and busts of Lenin. The elderly woman sings to Kee’s baby and presents her with a swan sculpted from an orange. Sirdjan (Faruk Pruti), a middle-aged man from the Balkans, gifts Theo a much-needed pair of shoes, procures a boat for them to meet the Human Project, and later dies helping them get to shore. Here, in the ironic setting of a former English bank now occupied by an aged couple from the former Soviet Union, the Russian Revolution sprouts to life like a weed through the cracks of capitalism’s foundation. This is an image of Jesus the Left can live with, a Christ worth imitating — one who perseveres in working for reasonable accommodations for all.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

1. Klein explains on her website that she sent Cuarón a copy of her latest book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, because

“I adore his films and felt that the future he created for *Children* was very close to the present I was seeing in disaster zones” (Klein 2007a: unpaginated).

Žižek likewise sees in the future depicted by *Children* the present “ideological despair of late capitalism” (Žižek 2006a: unpaginated). Cuarón included both of them in the bonus features of the DVD of *Children*. He also created a short film to promote Klein’s book, which can be viewed at:

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/video/2007/sep/07/naomiklein>>.

[[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

2. This reading was not lost on Christians. See, for instance, Todd Hertz’s review: <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/reviews/2007/iamlegend.html>>.

3. The virus is named after Dr. Alice Krippen (uncredited Emma Thompson), whose cure for cancer — a genetically re-engineered measles virus — mutates into the lethal strain that wreaks havoc on the planet. *Krippen* is the German word for “cribs” or “mangers,” and carries connotations of the Nativity Scene. In the allegorical structure of *Legend*, the Krippen Virus quite literally sets the scene for Christ’s second coming.

4. Neville travels to the South Street Seaport at noon everyday and broadcasts the following message:

“My name is Robert Neville. I am a survivor living in New York City. I am broadcasting on all a.m. frequencies. I will be at the South Street Seaport everyday at midday, when the sun is highest in the sky. If you are out there...if anyone is out there...I can provide food, I can provide shelter, I can provide security. If there’s anybody out there...anybody...please. You are not alone.”

Neville’s equanimous broadcast, with its echoes of Psalm 18:2 and John 16:32, contrasts strikingly with Vincent Price’s existential loneliness in the first filmic adaptation of Richard Matheson’s book, *The Last Man on Earth* (1964):

“This is Robert Morgan. If somebody can hear me, answer me. For God’s sake, ANSWER ME. This is KOKW calling. KOKW calling! Answer me!”

While Morgan desperately desires “somebody,” Neville can console and care for “anybody.”

If Neville is indeed Christ, as I believe he is in the world of *Legend*, when Anna listens to his radio broadcast, she literally hears the voice of God. When Neville denies that God told her to find him, he says,

“My voice on the radio told you to come here, Anna.”

At this point in the film, Neville is simply unaware of his divinity. Later when his sacrifice turns him into Christ, his final act retroactively acknowledges that it was he, *the* God, who broadcast his plan to Anna. Anna’s faith is so strengthened by the apocalyptic event of the plague — she can hear God better in the now quieter world — that she comes to H/him.

5. The necessity of Neville’s sacrifice should not go unquestioned. Why does Neville not throw the grenade and duck into the chute with Anna and Ethan? Why does he have to become a suicide bomber in order to defeat the dark seekers?

6. <http://godstilllovesus.org> is a viral marketing site created by Time Warner to promote *Legend*. The site contains a photography contest in which entrants submit pictures that display the “God Still Loves Us” logo in various settings. One grand prize winner receives a MacBook Pro 15", which is significant because Apple’s products are predominantly placed in the film. The site also contains message boards on theological and philosophical issues and a newsfeed to stories on current events with specific emphasis on disasters. That religion is not immune to the viral logic of capitalism is nothing new, but the way in which Time Warner uses religious belief to peddle its cinematic product significantly contrasts with the absence of cross-marketing promotions in NBC Universal’s *Children*. No corresponding “The Human Project Lives” website exists. If one were created for commercial purposes, would it not contradict the meaning of the Human Project within the worldview of the film?

7. Perhaps the “butterfly effect” also accounts for Anna’s connection to Brazil. At the time of the outbreak, she was evacuated from São Paulo aboard a Red Cross ship. Could her “flight” have set in motion the events of the film? A less speculative reading of Anna involves the film’s creators and its intended audience. The fantastic gaze of (predominantly white) Western Christians projects onto Anna, a devout Latino woman from Brazil, the status of “true believer,” or “subject supposed to believe.” As Žižek explains,

“There are some beliefs, the most fundamental ones, which are from the very outset ‘decentered,’ beliefs of the Other....From the very outset, the speaking subject displaces his belief onto the big Other...from the very beginning, the subject refers to some decentered other to whom he imputes this belief” (Žižek 2002:



unpaginated).

Žižek cites the role that children and “ordinary working people” play as stand-ins of the big Other for parents and Communist intellectuals, respectively. To this list I would add the Catholic Latino Other to whom white, Western Christians impute their spiritual belief. A white American Anna (played by someone like Jennifer Aniston) would be ridiculous precisely because she would not have fit within the fantasy frame of the film.

[7b] Further evidence that butterflies signify the divine providence of fundamentalist “knowledge” (and the incorporation of a premodern teleology within the modern world) can be found in Francis Lawrence’s most recent project, the television series *Kings* on NBC, which imagines the contemporary United States as a monarchical society called Gilboa. A butterfly on the kingdom’s orange flag symbolizes God’s supposed anointment of King Silas (Ian McShane). In Silas’ story, which he repeats verbatim, a swarm of Monarch butterflies landed on his head in the shape of a “living crown” to signal his divine right to rule. We do not know if this moment actually occurred or if it is a myth meant to keep the people enthralled to their leader, until we witness the butterflies crowning a young soldier named David Shepherd (Chris Egan). Their presence indicates the real existence of a metaphysical realm that guides the events of the world in a predetermined fashion—the exact same role that butterflies play in *Legend*. (No wonder *Kings* retells the Old Testament story of King David’s ascension.) That Lawrence uses butterflies in *Kings* as he did in *Legend* cannot be a coincidence.

8. Notably, Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song” plays during the credits, giving a specific meaning to the lyrics: “...We’ve got to fulfill the book.” Neville also tells Anna about Marley’s “virologist idea” to “cure racism and hate...by injecting music and love into people’s lives.” Neville’s view of racism as a religious and moral problem contrasts with *Children*’s representation of its political and economic roots.

9. As Christian allegories, *Legend* and *Children* star black religious figures. Because of class differences between Neville and Kee, only the latter treats race progressively. *Legend* uses Neville, an affluent African American from Manhattan, to make a religious and nationalistic appeal to Americans from all races to unite against a common enemy. *Children* uses Kee, a Third World refugee, to argue that the struggle for emancipation begins with the wretched of the earth.

10. The ideological move here would have been to make Kee, the black illegal immigrant, the “true believer,” just as *Legend* figures Anna. To repeat the thought experiment of f.7: Would Theo believe, even for an instant, in the immaculate conception of a white and well-off Kee?

11. One possible objection to the claim that *Children* rejects metaphysics involves the animals in the film. In the tradition of fairytales, the animals take a supernatural liking to Theo and seem to operate as helpers for the heroes to reach their destination. For example, dogs seem to intentionally increase the volume of their barking to cover the noise of Kee’s labor pangs. I argue that

the film's animal scenes, along with its nods to religious allegory, are ludic pastiches of archaic literary forms.

12. Jasper seems to slip into mythical discourse when he states that Dylan's birth was inevitable because "he loved it here." Does Jasper not affirm that replayed in all possible universes, Dylan — right down to the random genetic recombinations that formed his singularity — would be born? Granted Jasper's New Age flirtations, he does seem to contradict himself here. However, we could read "Dylan" in the sentence "Theo and Julian would always bring Dylan" as an open signifier, one not pinned to a specific individual per se, but one representative of a general idea, a signifier that stands for their belief in changing the world incarnate.

13. As reported by AP reporter Holly Ramer, Republican presidential nominee John McCain also fancies himself an omega man. Throughout his campaign's ups and downs,

"he's shown the stamina of the last man on Earth. 'I've been declared dead in this campaign on five or six occasions. I won't refer to a recent movie I saw, but I think I am legend,' [McCain] told reporters, referring to the film in which Will Smith stars as the last man on Earth" (Ramer 2008: unpaginated).

McCain's reference to this particular piece of pop culture should not be treated as incidental, but as a calculated political move geared to rally Christians to support his neoconservative candidacy. [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]

14. Arlen Parsa discusses several of the political references of the film in her blog, *The Daily Background*, which can be accessed at: <http://www.thedailybackground.com/2006/12/31/exclusive-political-references-in-new-film-children-of-men-examined-illustrated/>.

15. Since, in many respects, cars represent the world of commodities at large, the contrast between *Children's* depiction of automobiles and *Legend's* is not incidental. The Fiats and Renaults of the former are not the concept cars on display in standard fare futuristic films like *I, Robot* (2004). They are old, boxy, covered in grime, and often fail to work properly, i.e. they are not a fantasy being sold to the audience. The only car that looks like it has just been driven off the showroom floor is a Bentley Arnage R that escorts Theo into the Ark of Arts to see Nigel. Close-ups of this car emphasize class differences between those in the inner and outer circles.

16. Several critics point to the video rental store scene as one of the highlights of the film. For them, Neville's interaction with mannequins recalls Tom Hanks' performance as Noland in *Cast Away* (2000) when he paints a face on a volleyball and talks to it to stave off loneliness. From a cultural studies perspective, I am less interested in the existential dread of a lone survivor than I am in how Neville procures a modicum of normality by sustaining an everyday experience of consumer society. Instead of transferring the DVDs he desires en masse, he visits the store each day to exchange videos to maintain

the illusion that he is only renting.

17. The titles of online articles that discuss *Legend's* advertising encapsulate its hypercommercial subtext: "I Am Legendary Product Placement," "*I Am Legend*; *Ford is Legend*," "GT500 Stars in *I Am Legend*."

18. For examples of *Children's* ironic "anamorphic advertising," see the YouTube video, "Children of Men: Advertising From The Future" at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVnIrXmdYhY>.

19. "Not so long ago, disasters were periods of social leveling, rare moments when atomized communities put divisions aside and pulled together. Today they are moments when we are hurled further apart, when we lurch into a radically segregated future where some of us will fall off the map and others ascend to a parallel privatized state, one equipped with well-paved highways and skyways, safe bridges, boutique charter schools, fast-lane airport terminals, and deluxe subways" (Klein 2007c: 50). [[return to page 3 of essay](#)]

20. In one draft of the script available online, Mark Protosevich's description of Neville's "turn-of-the-century house" unwittingly demonstrates the "class warfare" aspect of gated green zones. Although the house looks normal from without, "normal it is not": "Every window and door has been bricked and cemented shut....security cameras jut out at odd angles, pointing at every corner of the surrounding landscape." In addition, two fences constructed of wood beams, telephone poles, metal sheets, iron staffs, sharp wooden spikes, and barbed and razor wire outline the perimeter. A crude, three foot deep moat adds a royal touch. The full description can be found at <http://www.horrorlair.com/scripts/legend.txt>.

21. The alternate ending can be viewed at: <http://www.firstshowing.net/2008/03/05/must-watch-i-am-legends-original-ending-this-is-amazing/>.

22. Nick Turse uses the term "military-industrial-entertainment complex." See Turse, Nick (2008) *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

23. See Branston, Gill (2007) "The Planet at the End of the World: 'Event' Cinema and the Representability of Climate Change." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. 5:2, 211-229.

24. Maurice Yacowar provided the first formalist taxonomy of the disaster genre. See Yacowar, Maurice (1986) "The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Genre." *Film Genre Reader*. ed. Grant, Barry Keith. Austin: University of Texas, 217-235. Yacowar's study lists eight basic types of disaster films: natural attack, the ship of fools, the city fails, the monster, survival, war, historical, and the comic. Although *Children* and *Legend* borrow elements from some of these genres, neither film could be classified as one of these types. However, as responses to the contemporary political constellation, they reflect one of the conventions Yacowar highlights: "Often the disasters have a contemporary significance" (Yacowar 2001: 231). For a more recent study of the disaster genre, see Keane, Stephen (2001) *Disaster*

*Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe*. London: Wallflower.

25. It bears mentioning here that *Children's* foreground story carefully draws a line between terroristic resistance and "something else." That "something else" may entail a recognition of the mutual problem of neoliberal capitalism, an acknowledgment of political stakes, the willingness to die for an indeterminate cause, leftist politics. At the very least, *Children* argues for a purely formal gesture of united resistance, something in the vein of Jameson's cautious call for "anti-anti-utopianism." *Children* poses the question: Can terrorism ever be an effective form of resistance, or does it always devolve into hysterical provocation where the terrorists get caught up in a zero-sum "war game" of mutual destruction with the state they oppose? The fine line is best represented by the difference between Julian, whose true allegiance as a "mirror" is to the clandestine Human Project, and the rest of the Fishes, whose prime motive — from its idealistic to ignorantly dangerous ranks — is the suicidal Uprising.

## References

Buchanan, Ian (2006) *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory*. London: Continuum.

Busack, Richard von (2007) "Making the Future: An interview with Alfonso Cuarón." *Metroactive*. 22 April 2007.

<<http://www.metroactive.com/metro/01.10.07/alfonso-cuaron-0702.html>>.

Cuarón, Alfonso. Dir. *Children of Men*. Perf. Clive Owen, Julianne Moore, Michael Caine, and Claire-Hope Ashitey. 2006. DVD. Universal, 2007.

Harvey, David (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford.

"Interview: Alfonso Cuarón" (2006) *Moviehole.net*. 22 May 2008.

<[http://www.moviehole.net/interviews/20061021\\_interview\\_alfonso\\_cuaron.html](http://www.moviehole.net/interviews/20061021_interview_alfonso_cuaron.html)>.

Jameson, Fredric (1988) "Metacommentary." *The Ideologies of Theory Volume I: Situations of Theory*. Minneapolis: Minnesota, 3-16.

Klein, Naomi (2007a) "The Shock Doctrine Short Film." 16 Jan. 2008

<<http://www.naomiklein.org/shock-doctrine/short-film>>.

Klein, Naomi (2007b) *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan.

Klein, Naomi (2007c) "Disaster Capitalism: The New Economy of Catastrophe." *Harper's*. October: 47-58.

Klein, Naomi (2007d) *Alternet.com*. 22 Mar. 2009

<[http://www.alternet.org/blogs/video/62129/the\\_cia's\\_love\\_affair\\_with\\_shock\\_therapy\\_%5Bvideo%5D/](http://www.alternet.org/blogs/video/62129/the_cia's_love_affair_with_shock_therapy_%5Bvideo%5D/)>



Lawrence, Francis. Dir. *I Am Legend*. Perf. Will Smith, Salli Richardson, and Alice Braga. 2007.

Marx, Karl (2000) "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. 2nd Ed. Ed. David McLellan. Oxford: Oxford.

McCarthy, Erin (2007) "*I Am Legend*'s Junk Science: Hollywood Sci-Fi vs. Reality." *Popular Mechanics*. 27 May 2008.

<[http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/worst\\_case\\_scenarios/4236920.html?page=1](http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/worst_case_scenarios/4236920.html?page=1)>.

Mondello, Bob (2007) "*I Am Legend* a One-Man American Metaphor." *All Things Considered*. NPR. 3 June 2008.

<<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17260869>>.

Ramer, Holly (2008) "McCain: 'I Am Legend.'" *USA Today*. 21 Dec. 2008.

<[http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/2007-12-28-2824987828\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/2007-12-28-2824987828_x.htm)>.

Sauer, Abram (2007) "Brandchannel's 2006 Product Placement Awards." *brandchannel.com*. 12 June 2008.

<[http://www.brandchannel.com/start1.asp?fa\\_id=355](http://www.brandchannel.com/start1.asp?fa_id=355)>.

Žižek, Slavoj (2006a) "*Children of Men*: Comments by Slavoj Žižek."

<<http://www.childrenofmen.net/>>.

Žižek, Slavoj (2002) "The Interpassive Subject. *The Symptom*. 3, Autumn. 27 Jan. 2008.

<<http://www.lacan.com/interpassf.htm>>.

Žižek, Slavoj (2006b) *How to Read Lacan*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Žižek, Slavoj (2006c) "The Clash of Civilizations at the End of History." 16 Jan. 2008

<<http://www.childrenofmen.net/slavoj.html>>.

Žižek, Slavoj (2007) "Deleuze and the Lacanian Real." 17 Jan. 2008

<<http://www.lacan.com/zizrealac.htm>>.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).

Further evidence that butterflies signify the divine providence of fundamentalist "knowledge" (and the incorporation of a premodern teleology within the modern world) can be found in Francis Lawrence's most recent project, the television series *Kings* on NBC, which imagines the contemporary United States as a monarchial society called Gilboa. A butterfly on the kingdom's orange flag symbolizes God's supposed anointment of King Silas (Ian McShane). In Silas' story,

which he repeats verbatim, a swarm of Monarch butterflies landed on his head in the shape of a “living crown” to signal his divine right to rule. We do not know if this moment actually occurred or if it is a myth meant to keep the people enthralled to their leader, until we witness the butterflies crowning a young soldier named David Shepherd (Chris Egan). Their presence indicates the real existence of a metaphysical realm that guides the events of the world in a predetermined fashion—the exact same role that butterflies play in Legend. (No wonder Kings retells the Old Testament story of King David’s ascension.) That Lawrence uses butterflies in Kings as he did in Legend cannot be a coincidence.



Despite his intimate association with the law, even Superman must constitute himself as an exception to it. The superhero is exceptional by definition.

## The exceptional darkness of *The Dark Knight*

by [Todd McGowan](#)

### The exceptional superhero

The superhero film and its comic book source contend that the law alone is not a sufficient condition for justice. From the time of Superman's emergence in the first superhero comic book in 1938, the law's inadequacy has been the genre's central concern, and this theme has remained constant through the proliferation of superhero films in the 1990s and 2000s. Under even the most benign historical circumstances, injustice is more powerful than justice, and as a result, justice requires an exceptional figure who operates outside or on the periphery of the law. This figure, the superhero, goes where the law can't go and accomplishes what it can't accomplish. According to the scripts' logic, superheroes earn their exceptional status by dint of some extra-human ability or some special skill that others lack. Endowed with this ability or skill, the superhero acquires an exceptional relation to the law. By skirting or even violating particular laws in order to sustain the order of law, the superhero provides the extra-legal supplement that the law requires in order to deliver justice.



Batman's mask indicates that he is not simply a figure of the law but exists in an exceptional relation to it.



Official law enforcement alone cannot stem the criminality rampant in Gotham.

The mask that superheroes wear indicates their complex relation to the law. Ordinary police officers can avow their identity publicly, and this is what separates them from criminals, who would be in jail if they publicly avowed *their* criminality. Even undercover police officers cease hiding their identity after each assignment, and those who can't effectively become criminals. Being a figure of the law includes implicitly the public avowal of one's status.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]. Superheroes, however, are a different type of figure. While they struggle against criminals who break the law, superheroes cannot openly identify themselves with law's public nature. They represent instead the underside of public law, the dimension of private support that it requires in order to function effectively as a public institution.[2]

Even the most ethical superheroes occupy a position outside of the order of law



George W. Bush premised his presidency on the idea that the law was insufficient for confronting the threat of terrorism.



Conservatives have seen Christopher's Nolan's new version of *Batman* as an analogue for George W. Bush. Both find the law inadequate for dealing with extreme threats.

simply by virtue of their heightened powers. Critics usually see Superman as one of the least engaging superheroes precisely because of his probity and absence of any dark side to his character.[3] Unlike other superheroes, Superman almost never violates the law — except perhaps with indecent exposure in phone booths — in order to uphold the legal order. But he does, as in Richard Donner's original *Superman: The Movie* (1978), violate the laws of the universe, causing the earth to spin backwards and time to reverse itself in order to save Lois Lane (Margot Kidder). Donner's film presents this act as a moment of ethical crisis because it reveals Superman's exceptional relation to law and the way that his superpowers places him at odds with the law's limited and limiting nature. The uneasiness of the superhero's — and, in fact, that of the hero as such — coexistence with the law prompts German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel to see them as antithetical.

Hegel lived through the French Revolution and his thought was shaped by it. Through the experience of revolution, he saw that modernity possessed the capacity for radical change but lacked the philosophical space for thinking of a hero as the agent of that change. As a result, though the philosopher was unacquainted with Superman, Hegel thought a great deal about the phenomenon that Superman represents. In Hegel's aesthetic philosophy, he distinguishes between a heroic age and the era of legal order. In the latter era of legal order, ethical activity is realized through the laws of the state rather than through individual action. Though laws can be unjust and we may have to change them, our ethical activity occurs within the law rather than outside it once a legal order has been established. The legal order thus leaves no room for the hero, the figure who acts outside of the law's constraint. Heroism is antithetical to law because it always serves to constitute its own law even if it doesn't mean to do so. For the hero, as Hegel puts it,

“Individuality is a law unto itself, without being subjected to an independently subsisting law, judgement, and tribunal.”[4]

In the context of legal order, the hero's activity would become criminality, and there would be no way to differentiate it from evil. This is why Hegel rejects the idea of a modern hero. Such a figure fails to see how the private morality that it proffers as an alternative or as a supplement to the legal order is already included within that order. As a result of its structural incompatibility, the hero's activity will have the effect of undermining the law even if it is done to supplement the law. But a problem remains: Left to itself the law cannot arrive at justice, and the persistence of injustice within the legal order leads to a demand for the hero and for an heroic exception to the law.[5]

Using Batman, not Superman, as the protagonist, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) takes this problem posed by the hero and the hero's exceptional status in relation to the law as its overriding concern. The title for the film (though not the plot) derives from Frank Miller's 1986 graphic novel series *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and it provides a less idealizing portrait of Batman than those developed previously. The film is not simply, however, a





For Hegel, modernity renders heroism impossible because it institutes the rule of law.

critique of heroic exceptionality. The film's universe makes clear the need for an exception to the law. Without Batman (Christian Bale) providing extra-legal assistance to Police Lieutenant James Gordon (Gary Oldman), the crime lords that menace Gotham would render the city uninhabitable. Even with Batman's help, the film's ominous and brooding mise-en-scène reveals the extent to which criminality sets the tone for life there. Unlike Nolan's earlier film *Batman Begins* (2005), in which Gotham appears as a futuristic city despite its crime problem, here crime shapes the look and feel of the city as grim. Buildings stand in disrepair; people's dress is generally disheveled; and even daytime scenes occur under dark skies.

Given the film's appreciation of the need for heroic exception to the legal order, it is easy to understand why a right-wing political commentator, after viewing the film, might regard it as a tribute to George W. Bush and his prosecution of the Iraq War. In his *Wall Street Journal* article, "What Bush and Batman Have in Common," Andrew Klavan contends in this vein,



Harvey Dent seems to embody the possibility of a heroism that could show its true face to the public.

"There seems to me no question that the Batman film *The Dark Knight*, currently breaking every box office record in history, is at some level a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war. Like W, Batman is vilified and despised for confronting terrorists in the only terms they understand. Like W, Batman sometimes has to push the boundaries of civil rights to deal with an emergency, certain that he will re-establish those boundaries when the emergency is past." [6]

The similarity between Bush and Batman consists in their joint recognition that an exceptional threat to the legal order requires an extra-legal exception in order to quell the threat. Though Klavan has to read the film creatively in order to arrive at the thesis that it constitutes "a conservative movie about the war on terror," he does rightly grasp the film's fundamental contention that we need a figure of exception. [7]



Harvey Dent's public heroism turns into criminality when confronted with trauma.

The problem with accepting and celebrating the hero's exceptionality is not simply that such acceptance produces conservative misreadings but that this exceptionality has an inherent tendency to multiply itself exponentially. In *Dark Knight*, this kind of proliferation occurs early in the film when copycat vigilantes place both themselves and others at risk. In the United States during the War on Terror, exceptionality takes the form of an ever-increasing extension of surveillance and security. Once we grant the necessity of the position of the exception, the law can no longer define those who will occupy this position nor restrain their activity. Once we violate rights of non-citizens, we will soon be violating the rights of citizens as well, and finally we will end up with a society in which rights as such cease to exist. The exception necessarily exists beyond the limits of the law, and if the law could contain its magnitude, it would cease to be



Police set their dogs on Batman because he willingly embraces the image of criminality.



Because criminals run the city, the city needs an exceptional rescuer outside the law.



As a superhero, Batman is an heroic exception who supports the law by violating it.

exceptional. This is the dilemma that shapes *The Dark Knight*. The film's incredible popularity attests not simply to Nolan's skill as a filmmaker or to a successful marketing campaign by Warner Brothers but also to the contemporary urgency of the question it addresses.

The film begins with Batman's grasp of the problem, as it depicts his attempt to relinquish his exceptional status and to allow the legal order to operate on its own. In order to do this, a different form of heroism is required, and the quest that constitutes *The Dark Knight* is Batman's attempt to find the proper public face for heroism. He is drawn to Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) because Dent seems to embody the possibility of a heroism that would be consistent with public law and that could consequently function without the need for disguise. After the death of Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal) and Dent's own serious facial burn transforms him from a defender of the law into the criminal figure Two-Face, Batman sees the impossibility of doing away with the hero's mask. Dent, the would-be hero without a mask, quickly becomes a criminal himself when he experiences traumatic loss. This turn of events reveals that the hero must remain an exception, but it also shows that the heroism of the hero must pass itself off as its opposite.

Just as the truth that Leonard (Guy Pearce) discovers at the end of Nolan's *Memento* (2000) is a constitutive lie, the conclusion of *The Dark Knight* illustrates that the true form of appearance of heroism is evil. The film concludes with Batman voluntarily taking responsibility for the murders that Dent/Two-Face committed. By doing so, Batman allows Dent to die as a hero in the public mind, but he also — and more importantly — changes the public perception of his own exceptional status. When he agrees to appear as a criminal at the end of the film, Batman avows simultaneously the need for the heroic exception and the need for this exception to appear as criminality. If the heroic exception is not to multiply itself in a way that threatens any possibility for justice, then its appearance must become indistinguishable from criminality.

The heroic gesture, as *The Dark Knight* conceives it, does not consist in any of the particular crime-fighting or life-saving activities that Batman performs throughout the film. It lies rather in his embrace of the appearance of criminality that concludes the film. Gordon's voiceover panegyric to Batman that punctuates the film affirms that this is the truly heroic act. This act privileges and necessitates its own misrecognition: it is only through misrecognition that one sees it correctly. If the people of Gotham were to see through Batman's form of appearance and recognition his real heroism, the heroism would be instantly lost. As the film portrays it, the form of appearance of authentic heroism must be that of evil. Only in this way does the heroic exceptionality that the superhero embodies avoid placing us on the road to fascist rule.

## From Batman to Guantanamo

The nearest cousin to the superhero film is the western. Both genres address the problem of exceptional violence that resides outside the legal order and yet is necessary for the existence of that order. However, the western concerns the initial violence that founds the law, what Walter Benjamin labels "lawmaking violence."<sup>[8]</sup> In George Stevens' *Shane* (1953), for instance, the violence of Shane (Alan Ladd) helps to establish a democratic and agrarian society that will replace the ranchers' lawless reign. Shane acts violently in defense of the Starrett family and their farm, but his violence has no legal authorization because it occurs before the law has been firmly constituted. In order for the



Though Shane exists outside the law, he leaves at the end of the film so as not to disturb the law's proper functioning. This is the trajectory typical of a western.

social order that his violence finds to function as a legal entity, Shane must leave at the end of the film. His violence has a purely exceptional status, and his departure confirms that the exception can disappear after the new social order comes into existence.

There is no such recourse for exceptionality in the superhero film. This type of film confronts not the necessity of lawmaking violence but that of a certain necessary violence that exists outside the law.[9] The law evokes this violence in extreme situations that merely legal violence cannot properly address. In *The Dark Knight*, the extreme situation is the rampant criminality of the various gangs that control Gotham. Responding to each outburst of excessive criminal activity that the police themselves cannot handle, Lieutenant Gordon shines the Bat Signal in the night sky and thus announces the decree of a temporary state of exception in which Batman will employ violence to supplement the police.

Unlike Shane, Batman does not ultimately leave the society that he sustains with his violence. Once the western hero violently carves out the place for a modern society, he must abandon that society in order to avoid contaminating it with his violence. But Batman remains as a persistent exception that the law cannot do without, and as a result, the superhero film confronts a more imposing dilemma than the western does. A western can simply end with the departure of the hero (or his domesticization, as in the conclusion of Howard Hawks' *Red River*, 1948), but the superhero film has no such recourse. For the sake of the possibility of justice, the superhero must remain. But his presence as an exception is problematic, calling into question the legality of the law. By their very presence, superheroes expose the law's inherent insufficiency and inspire everyone to doubt its efficacy. The heroic exception constantly works to undermine the law that it supplements.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben sees the great danger inherent in the exception. It leads not just to abuses of civil rights but to large-scale horrors like the Holocaust, which functions as a major point of reference for Agamben's thought. Exceptionality, for Agamben, launches a legal civil war and thereby plays the key role in the transition from democracy to fascist authoritarianism. The declaration of the state of exception attempts

“to produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible.”[10]

The problem is that the exceptional time never comes to an end, and the disappearance of the distinction between an emergency and everyday life pushes the society toward a state of civil war that the very exception itself was supposed to quell. Rather than acting as a temporary stopgap for a society on the brink of self-annihilation, the state of exception actually pushes the society further down the path to this annihilation by undermining the distinction between law and criminality and thereby helping to foster a Hobbesian war of all against all, in which every act of sovereign power becomes justified in the name of order.

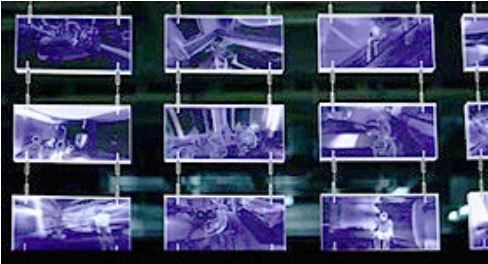


Giorgio Agamben is the philosopher of the exception who examines threats that the state of exception poses to democratic society.





The danger that Batman's exceptionality poses becomes most evident in the system of total surveillance that he develops.



Like George W. Bush, Batman believes that he must see everywhere in order to fight extreme criminality.



Unlike George W. Bush, Batman arranges the self-destruction of the system of surveillance that he uses.



Exceptionality multiplies itself as vigilantes follow the example of Batman and threatens to overrun the law completely.



Batman derides the vigilante's hockey pads, but the humor elides the fact that there is no difference in their relation to the law.

*The Dark Knight* begins with a focus on the problem engendered by the state of exception embodied by Batman. He is a figure outside the law on whom the law relies to respond to the most recalcitrant criminal elements in Gotham. But Batman's very success at fighting crime outside the law has, when the film opens, spawned numerous imitators — vigilantes who dress like Batman and spend their nights fighting crime. The result is an increased degree of lawlessness and insecurity in the city. Through these copycat vigilantes, the film begins by making clear the danger of the sanctioned exception that exists outside the law. Once one embraces the exception, the need for exceptionality will constantly expand insofar as the exception augments the very problem that it is created to fight against.

The fake Batmen question Batman directly on the monopoly he attempts to hold on exceptionality. After Batman rescues them from their botched effort to interrupt a drug deal, he warns them against this type of activity:

One says, "What gives you the right? What's the difference between you and me?"

Batman responds, "I'm not wearing hockey pads."

While amusing, this quip is actually wholly inadequate as an argument. Batman has no inherent right to guard exceptionality for himself, and as long as he occupies this position, others will be drawn to it. And a self-multiplying exceptionality portends the destruction of the social order.

The state of exception justifies any type of action — any encroachment on civil liberties — in order to realize the justice that ordinary law is incapable of realizing. *The Dark Knight* explicitly links the heroic exception embodied by Batman with the violation of civil liberties associated with the official declaration of a state of emergency (in the current War on Terror, for instance). Batman acts exceptionally not just by wearing a mask and breaking a few traffic laws but by creating a system of surveillance that completely erases the idea of private space within Gotham. When Batman commissions his technical designer Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) to create a device that will allow him to map the location of everyone within the entire city of Gotham, Fox balks at the violation of civil liberties that this entails. He agrees to help to catch the Joker (Heath Ledger) but promises to resign immediately afterward. As Fox changes from fully supporting Batman and his exceptionality, his outrage signifies that Batman has crossed a line beyond heroic exceptionality where one can no longer differentiate the heroic masked man from the criminals that he pursues. But in order to apprehend the Joker and disrupt his criminal plans, the film makes clear that Batman must cross this line. It places him fully on the terrain of contemporary politics and in the company of conservative political figures.

[Go to page 2](#)





In order to combat the danger of the exception, Batman must adopt the mask of criminality.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Dick Cheney interprets our time as a state of exception, which justifies any means in response to criminality.



The prison in Guantanamo Bay is the end result of the logic of exceptionality. Batman's strategy risks leading to this conclusion.

The logic of the War on Terror waged by President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney derives entirely from the idea that they rule in a state of emergency where the normal rule of law will be insufficient for safeguarding the U.S. populace. One must thus carve out an exceptional position outside the law. One of the ramifications of this idea is the legitimization of torture as a normal practice during the interrogation of anyone suspected of having a link with a terrorist organization. But the other ramification touches directly on the actions of Batman in *The Dark Knight*. The War on Terror, as conceived by Bush and Cheney, is being fought with increased surveillance more than with additional weapons. The nature of the emergency calls for exceptional measures of surveillance, including eavesdropping on telephone calls, spying on emails, and using satellites to track movements, all without court authorization. When Batman uses the device that Fox builds for him, the film's hero elevates himself to an exception in the Bush and Cheney sense of the term. This is one of the points of resonance that led conservative writer Andrew Klavan to link Batman and Bush. But there is nonetheless a fundamental distinction between the two figures and between Batman's relation to exceptionality and that displayed by Bush.

One might assume that the difference lies in Batman's readiness to abandon the system of total surveillance after he catches the Joker and the emergency ends. Batman arranges for the system to self-destruct after Lucius Fox has finished using it, and as he walks away from the exploding system, Fox smiles to himself, cheered by Batman's ethical commitment to abandoning the power Batman had amassed for himself. This image does certainly seem to contrast with the image of the system of surveillance established during the War on Terror, which increases rather than self-destructs as the September 11th attacks move further and further into history. Neither President Bush nor his successor will call an end to the War on Terror or revoke all of the aspects of the Patriot Act. But Klavan can nonetheless see a parallel between Batman's restoration of full civil rights and Bush's intention to do so after the emergency ends. The difference between Bush's version of the state of exception and Batman's — between the conservative and the leftist — does not ultimately reside in the fact that it is temporary for Batman and permanent for Bush. Both figures view it as temporary, but what separates Batman is the attitude that he takes toward this violation of the law: he accepts that his willingness to embrace this type of exceptionality constitutes him as a criminal. Because he views it as a criminal act, Batman is quick to eliminate it. But this is precisely what Bush would be loath to accept and why he views the War on Terror as a quasi-eternal struggle.



The problem of evil isn't the extreme criminal but the way that evil insinuates itself in even our good



The rejection of a consequentialist ethics focused on end results brings the Joker close to the position of

acts.



The Joker articulates an ethical position much more rigorous than most law-abiding citizens of Gotham have.

Kantian morality.



The Joker's condemnation of scheming links Batman and himself as ethical figures.



Dent's destruction reveals the ultimate failure of all ethical positions with a basis in scheming.

The superhero film has emerged as a popular genre when the problem of the state of exception has moved to the foreground historically. That is not to say, of course, that superhero films owe their popularity to George W. Bush, but that they attract an audience when the relationship between exceptionality and the law has increasingly come into question. As Agamben notes,

“The state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics. This transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government threatens radically to alter — in fact, has already palpably altered — the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms.”<sup>[11]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

The state of exception, for Agamben, is the path by which democracy falls into fascism. The exception becomes confounded with the rule and soon takes its place. From that point forward, a total authority emerges who exercises control over the people with their own security as this authority's justification. Because the heroic exception is written into the generic requirements, the superhero film exists within this political context.

Most superhero films simply affirm our need for the heroic exception and don't call the status of this exception into question. This is true for John Favreau's *Iron Man* (2008) and Louis Leterrier's *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), to name just two films released around the same time as *The Dark Knight*. As a result, even when they have some critical content about the ruling ideology — as with the (albeit limited) critique of the military-industrial complex in *Iron Man* — their form employing the heroic exception vitiates this content and ends up justifying the conservative direction of contemporary politics. In these films, even if the heroic exception causes certain problems, it is fundamentally necessary for the cause of justice, which would simply be overpowered without it.

The hero's relation to heroic exceptionality forms the basis of what constitutes





Immanuel Kant developed a moral philosophy that specifically eschewed calculation of interest. This aligns him theoretically with the Joker.



As an agent of chaos, the Joker reveals to the citizens of Gotham the futility of their calculating versions of morality.



The Joker displays indifference to money because he rejects a philosophy focused on ends. He is not looking to buy anything.

authentic heroism. If the hero adopts the position of exception as a difficult duty that one must perform for the sake of a greater good (the position of Iron Man, President Bush, Superman, and most exceptional heroes), then exceptionality becomes an unlimited end in itself that will never cease to be required. If, however, the hero adopts the position of exception as a criminal duty, as a necessity that removes him from the realm of heroism altogether, then exceptionality can realize itself in justice rather than in the production of an increasing amount of injustice. Nolan's film shows us that authentic heroism necessarily appears in the form of evil.

## Ethics is a joke

Justice requires an exception because our adherence to the law is always compromised from the outset. Many theorists who have tackled the question of the subject's relation to the law have run up against the same problem. The inventor of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, for one, contends that the basis of our acquiescence to the law lies in envy, envy of others' satisfaction, and that this inevitably distorts all social arrangements. Similarly, German philosopher Immanuel Kant posits that our devotion to the law is never devotion to the law for its sake but for some attendant pathological motivation. This becomes the central moral problem that Kant tries to work out in his 1788 *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant sees that even if we initially and instinctively obey the law, we do not do so for the right reasons.

According to Kant, when we emerge as subjects, we do so as beings of radical evil, that is, beings who do good for evil reasons. We help our neighbor for the recognition we gain; we volunteer to help with the school dance in order to spend time with a potential romantic interest; we give money for disaster relief in order to feel comfortable about our level of material comfort; and so on. For Kant, this is the fundamental problem that morality confronts and the most difficult type of evil to extirpate. He explains,

"The human being (even the best) is evil only because he reverses the moral order of his incentives in incorporating them into his maxims. He indeed incorporates the moral law into those maxims, together with the law of self-love; since, however, he realizes that the two cannot stand on an equal footing, but one must be subordinated to the other as its supreme condition, he makes the incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law — whereas it is this latter that, as *the supreme condition* of the satisfaction of the former, should have been incorporated into the universal maxim of the power of choice as the sole incentive." [12]

Though Kant believes that we have the capacity to turn from beings of radical evil to moral beings, we cannot escape a certain originary radical evil that leads us to place our incentives of self-love above the law and that prevents us from adhering to the law for its own sake. [13]





The burning money horrifies the other criminals who, unlike the Joker, have ends that they are trying to realize.



Kant defines diabolical evil as evil for its own sake, and he doesn't believe it can exist. Nolan tries to incarnate it in the figure of the Joker.



The Joker has no concern for ends. That extends even to his own death.

Our first inclination always involves the thought of what we will gain from not lying rather than the importance of telling the truth. Even when we do tell the truth, we do so out of prudence or convenience rather than out of duty. This is why Kant contends that most obedience to the moral law is in fact radical evil — obedience for the wrong reasons. The presence of radical evil at the heart of obedience to the law taints this obedience and gives criminality the upper hand over the law.

There is always a fundamental imbalance between law and criminality. Criminality is inscribed into the law itself in the form of misdirected obedience, and no law can free itself from its reliance on the evil of such obedience. A consequentialist ethics develops as a compromise with this radical evil at the heart of the law. Consequentialism is an ethics that sees value only in the end — obedience — and it disregards whatever evil means that the subject uses to arrive at that obedience. If people obey the law, the consequentialist thinks, it doesn't matter why they do so. Those who take up this or some other compromise with radical evil predominate within society, and they constitute the behavioral norm. They obey the law when necessary, but they do so in order to satisfy some incentive of self-love. Theirs is a morality of calculation in which acts have value in terms of the ultimate good that they produce or the interest that they serve. Anyone who obeys the law for its own sake becomes exceptional.

Both Batman and the Joker exist outside the calculating morality that predominates among the police, the law-abiding citizens, and the criminal underworld in Gotham. Both have the status of an exception because they adhere to a code that cuts against their incentives for self-love and violates any consequentialist morality or morality concerned solely with results. Though Batman tries to save Gotham and the Joker tries to destroy it, though Batman commits himself to justice and the Joker commits himself to injustice, they share a position that transcends the inadequate and calculated ethics authorized by the law itself. Their differences mask a similar relationship to Kantian morality. Through the parallel between them, Christopher Nolan makes clear the role that evil must play in authentic heroism.

It is the Joker, not Batman, who gives the most eloquent account of the ethical position that they occupy together. He sets himself up against the consequentialist and utilitarian ethic that rules Gotham, and he tries to analyze this ethic in order to understand what motivates it. As the Joker sees it, despite their apparent differences, all of the different groups in Gotham indulge in an ethics of what he calls scheming. That is to say, they act not on the basis of the rightness or wrongness of the act itself but in order to achieve some ultimate object. In doing so, they inherently degrade their acts and deprive them of their basis in freedom. Scheming enslaves one to the object of one's scheme.

For the Joker, the problem with scheming is not so much moral as it is aesthetic. [14] When one thinks of an action in terms of the end it will produce, one robs the action of its independence. When he talks to Dent after the latter's disfigurement, he explains,

"I don't have a plan. The mob has plans, the cops have plans. You know what I am, Harvey? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do if I caught one. I just do things. I'm a wrench in the gears. I hate plans. Yours, theirs, everyone's. Maroni has plans. Gordon has plans. Schemers trying to control their worlds. I am not a schemer. I show schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are. So when I say that what happened to you and your girlfriend wasn't personal, you know I'm telling the truth."



The film shows the ethical priority of evil in relation to good. The Joker teaches an ethical lesson to the citizens of Gotham.

The Joker explicitly denies seeking any object in his criminal activity, which separates him decisively from the other criminals in the film. This provides him a freedom that no one else, save Batman, can enjoy. He can burn piles of money or put his life at risk because he doesn't think of his acts in terms of the ends that they will accomplish for him. He breaks out of what Kant calls heteronomy in order to achieve autonomy.[15]

For Kant, adherence to the law designed to procure some object or some ultimate good leaves one inevitably bereft of freedom. As he points out in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*,



The smeared make-up indicates that it doesn't hide the Joker's identity but rather expresses it.

“If the will seeks the law that is to determine it *anywhere else* than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law — consequently if, in going beyond itself, it seeks this law in a property of any of its objects — *heteronomy* always results. The will in that case does not give itself the law; instead the object, by means of its relation to the will, gives the law to it.”[16]

Though Kant would not hold up the Joker as an exemplar of his morality, the latter does avoid, unlike the law-abiding citizens in the film, elevating an object above the law. The Joker's law, however, is one that Kant would not recognize. He values doing evil for its own sake, being “a wrench in the gears,” which marks out an ethical position that Kant believes cannot exist, that of the diabolically evil subject.[17]



The Joker's immunity to threats derives from his lack of investment in what he might accumulate or gain.

The Joker and Batman have an exceptional status in the film because they refuse the heteronomy that results from acting according to a calculus of ends. Both are figures who devote themselves to an ethical principle and follow it to its endpoint. For Batman, this is fighting injustice, and for the Joker, it is creating chaos. Even when this principle causes them harm or threatens their happiness, they nonetheless adhere to it. On several occasions in the film, the Joker welcomes his own death as part of his effort to unleash chaos, and Batman endures not only the physical pain that stems from his fight against injustice but also the absence of any recognition for what he does. Not only must he avoid revealing that Batman is really Bruce Wayne, but at the end of the film, he must also accept being an outcast and criminal figure as Batman himself. Even the one outsider who knows his true identity, Rachel, cannot properly love him because the singularity of his devotion to fighting injustice renders him incapable of existing in a love relationship. Both Batman and the Joker are completely isolated because they exist on a different ethical plane.[18]



The Joker offers his first explanation of the scars, which seems credible when

Though the Joker and Batman occupy the same terrain of the exception, Nolan shows the ethical priority of the figure of evil. The Joker goes further than Batman in his pursuit of an ethical position that privileges the act over its consequences. Unlike Batman, the Joker does not hold onto a symbolic identity that he hides beneath his make-up. In this sense, the film creates a clear contrast between make-up and a mask. If one removed Batman's mask, one would discover his true identity. The Joker's make-up does not hide his true identity, but instead it attests to the absence of one. All he is is located in his appearance. This is why he never seems to worry about his make-up when it



we first hear it.



The second explanation of the scars reveals the falsity of the first. There is no secret that motivates the Joker.



The boat armed with explosives presents the passengers with an ethical dilemma that engages their concerns with end results.



Blowing up the boat with the criminals seems to be the proper choice from a utilitarian perspective.

starts to come off.

The status of the Joker's make-up throughout the film reveals that its function is not one of hiding a true identity. Even when we first see him in the midst of robbing a bank, the white make-up that covers his face is not complete. The wrinkles on his forehead mark gaps through which his bare skin becomes visible. Later, during his interrogation at the police station, more gaps appear in the white make-up, and the black color around his eyes is smeared over his forehead. Though it distorts his appearance, the gradual disintegration of the Joker's make-up never bothers him nor threatens to reveal his identity.

The Joker's lack of attention to his make-up raises the question of why he puts it on in the first place. He does not attempt to deceive in the traditional way, but instead his make-up hides the fact that he has nothing to hide. He deceives characters in the film because they attribute motives behind his actions while these actions actually serve as their own motivation. That is, the Joker acts for the sake of acting, not in response to some grievance or in order to gain some object. This complete investment in the act itself creates a freedom for him that no other characters in the film — not even Batman — are able to share in. As Batman interrogates him, he can say with complete believability, "You have nothing to threaten me with." The Joker acts without concern for his object and without a basis in an identity that someone might exploit.

The identity (or lack of identity) of the Joker bespeaks his commitment to the act itself. Unlike the other characters in the film (including Batman), he has no identity that the film reveals. Nolan leaves the character of the Joker — his origins, his motivations, his real name — a complete mystery for the spectator, but it is not a mystery that one might figure out. The mystery is its own solution. Even after the police take him into custody, they can discover no information about him. Responding to the mayor's question concerning what they know about the Joker, Gordon says,

"Nothing. No DNA, no fingerprints. Clothing is custom, no tags or brand labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name, no other alias."

This complete absence of identifying information is not an indication that the Joker has successfully hidden who he really is but that he has no identity to hide.

The film further shows that even biographical information about the Joker has the status of pure appearance. On two occasions, he provides an account of how his face became disfigured. When we hear the first account, it appears to be a plausible description of a childhood trauma. As he prepares to kill the gangster Gambol (Michael Jai White), he explains,

"Want to know how I got these scars? My father was a drinker. And a fiend. And one night he goes off crazier than usual. Mommy gets the kitchen knife to defend herself. He doesn't like that. Not — one — bit. So, me watching, he takes the knife to her, laughing while he does it, turns to me, and he says, 'Why so serious?' Comes at me with the knife. 'Why so serious?' He sticks the blade in my mouth. 'Let's put a smile on that face.'"

Nolan films this explanation in a series of close-ups alternating between the Joker and Gambol, and the intensity visible on the Joker's face gives a sense of authenticity to this story. When he kills Gambol immediately afterward by slicing his face, the act appears to have its ultimate motivation in the violence done to the Joker when he was a child.



The vote leads to a decision to kill. Here, Nolan makes clear the ethical failure of democracy.



The prisoner takes charge and seems ready to blow up the other boat. The guard allows him to do so out of a desire to live.



The ethical act involves refusing the choice altogether, and it is the prisoner who performs it.



The civilian volunteers to blow up the other ship and then lacks the courage to go through with it. This contrasts with the explicitly ethical decision of the

But later, the Joker provides a conflicting account, and this second version reveals to the film's spectators that they know nothing about the Joker's past or about the trauma that disfigured his face. When he invades the fundraiser for Dent, he seizes Rachel and tells her,

"So I had a wife, beautiful, like you, who tells me I worry too much. Who tells me I ought to smile more. Who gambles and gets in deep with the sharks. Look at me! One day, they carve her face. And we have no money for surgeries. She can't take it. I just want to see her smile again. I just want her to know that I don't care about the scars. So I stick a razor in my mouth and do this to myself. And you know what? She can't stand the sight of me. She leaves. Now I see the funny side. Now I'm always smiling."

In contrast to the first scene where the Joker relates the origins of scars in a series of close-ups, in this one the explanation occurs while a 360 degree tracking shot circles the Joker and Rachel. The formal shift in the depiction of the Joker's explanation helps to transform the spectator's response to the Joker.

The Joker's first account of extreme child abuse at the hands of his father plays into contemporary explanations for violent criminality and thus provides a plausible, if not entirely justifying, reason for the Joker's activity. The form of the film during this first account further authenticates it. The close-ups of the Joker and his victim Gambol register the seriousness of what he says. But when he repeats the history of his scars with new content, the lack of seriousness of the history becomes apparent. The 360 degree tracking shot creates disequilibrium in the spectator appropriate to the revelation that the Joker is not really telling the history of his scars. We move from the close-ups, which provide a direct and seemingly veridical account of his history, to the 360 degree tracking shot, which enacts the circumlocution evident as we hear the story a second time with its content changed. The film offers us no way of adjudicating between the conflicting accounts (or discerning another) but instead suggests that the truth of the origin of the scars is unimportant. The Joker uses the story of their origin to shock and to create terror rather than to offer an explanation for his criminal acts. His acts cannot be reduced to what motivates them, and he attempts to promulgate the proper respect for the act throughout the film.

Because the Joker detests and wants to destroy the morality of scheming or consequentialism, he sets up a series of tests that challenge the capacity of this morality. He forces Batman to choose between saving Harvey Dent and Rachel Dawes. He threatens to blow up a hospital if no one murders within an hour the man who threatens to reveal Batman's identity. And he gives two boats fleeing Gotham Island a detonator for explosives on the other boat, promising to blow up both boats unless one blows up the other before midnight. This last test actually paves the way for citizens of Gotham to transcend the morality of calculation in the way that the Joker himself does. The problem of the two boats seems to provide a simple moral dilemma. If one thinks in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number — if one adopts the position of the schemer — it is clear that one boat must blow up the other in order that the people on both boats don't perish. And since one boat is filled with criminals being transferred and the other is filled with ordinary citizens, the ethical dilemma that the Joker offers seems easy to solve.[19] But Nolan depicts an abandonment of the



criminal.

morality of the schemer that at first appears to represent the typical kind of narrative cheating that one finds in the typical Hollywood film.

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The act of charity that concludes Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* shows us the basic goodness of ordinary people. *The Dark Knight* avoids this ideological conclusion by identifying the moral act with criminality.



The Joker occupies the ethical center of the film as he breaks from the world of calculation. Here he has just blown up a hospital.

The two ethical acts that culminate the film seem to mark a turn away from the critical edge that the film displays earlier and a capitulation to sentimental morality that sees the underlying goodness of humanity. One could view the end of *The Dark Knight* as a new version of the conclusion of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), where a mass eruption of compassion comes to rescue George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) from financial ruin. In *The Dark Knight*, the people on both boats decide to accept their own deaths rather than take responsibility for killing the people on the other boat. But in contrast to Capra, Nolan complicates the ethical dimension of the acts. He begins by showing the utter immorality of traditional consequentialist or utilitarian moral claims. The civilians on the first boat begin by insisting on their moral right to destroy the group of criminals on the second boat. One argues for blowing up the other boat by claiming, "They had their chance." If one group must die in order to save the other — this is the ground rule that the Joker establishes — then it is clear which group should live and which should perish. No one on the civilian boat argues for not blowing up the other boat, and it is clear that their arguments have nothing to do with morality and everything to do with their own survival.

What's more, the film reveals the completely antithetical relation between the institutions of democracy and ethical action. The authorities on the civilian boat decide — prompted by an outspoken passenger and due presumably to their devotion to the ideology of democracy — to vote on whether or not to destroy the other boat. As the film shows it, the simple act of voting on a question such as this underscores its inappropriateness. But when the authorities count the votes and a large majority (396-140) votes to blow up the criminal boat, we see baldly that democratic procedures (such as the popular vote) have no ethical status at all. In fact, the secret ballot allows each subject to retreat from the trauma of the ethical decision rather than confronting it directly. The film shows one passenger writing out his vote and handing it in with great determination, while a shot of another reveals his emotional struggle with the difficulties of the moral issue. But the way that Nolan films these two passengers — and his entire treatment of the vote — is replete with irony. Both of these attitudes toward the vote serve only to illustrate the absurdity of voting on the decision to blow up a boatful of other people. The vote is an inadequate mechanism for approaching a decision of this magnitude.

The ethical act occurs not through the hastily put together franchise on the civilian boat but through the revolutionary seizure of power on the prisoners' boat. During the crisis, Nolan focuses several shots on a group of large prisoners huddled together, appearing to conspire to take the detonator from the authorities on the boat who have it. The way that the prisoners are depicted accentuates their menace: they stare ominously at the authorities; they whisper to each other while staring; they

maintain a determined grimacing expression. These visual clues, added to the fact that the film establishes them as dangerous criminals, suggest that they are planning to seize the detonator and blow up the civilian ship in order to save their own lives. But the film turns the tables on the spectator's expectation.

The leader of this group of prisoners approaches the authority holding the detonator and confronts him. A shot of the frightened look on the guard's face shows how the prisoner intimidates him, not because the guard fears being overpowered but because he believes that the prisoner will force him to do what he wants to do anyway — that is, blow up the other boat. The prisoner upbraids the guard, "You don't want to die, but you don't know how to take a life." After the prisoner says this, Nolan cuts back to the other boat, where a civilian proclaims, "Those men on that boat. They made their choices." This crosscutting sequence appears to establish a kind of moral equivalency: though the prisoner is more straightforward about his willingness to kill in order to survive, the civilian partakes in exactly the same attitude. When the film cuts back to the prisoner's boat, the prisoner makes his final argument before taking the detonator. He says,

"Give it to me. You can tell them I took it by force. Give it to me, and I'll do what you should have done 10 minutes ago."

These words put the final touch on the conviction that the prisoner plans to blow up the other boat, but instead we see him take the detonator and throw it out the window into the water, apparently destroying his own chance at survival. In a subsequent close-up, the civilian who had volunteered to press the detonator softly lays it back in its box.

Both the prisoners and the civilians act in a way that violates not only their self-interest (risking death by refusing to kill someone else) but in a way that defies all rational calculation. According to the rules of the game that the Joker established, if neither boat uses the detonator, both boats will be destroyed. Rejecting this wager requires rejecting the morality of calculation because according to any calculation of good ends, it will be preferable that one boat survives rather than both being destroyed. Here, Nolan reveals that a group of anonymous people are capable of a great ethical act, but what saves this depiction from becoming Capraesque — and thus perpetuating an ideological fantasy allowing the spectator to leave the film assured of intrinsic human goodness — is where he locates the source of the ethical act and what factors militate against it.



Batman wants to cede his position to a hero who doesn't have to wear a mask.

The source of the ethical act is not the popular vote (which goes 396-140 against acting ethically), nor is it the good mother trying to protect her child (who argues for blowing up the prisoners), nor is it the figures of authority (who come across as feckless, unable to decide one way or the other). Instead, it is the prisoner, the figure of criminality, who is able to make the ethical gesture. And ultimately the Joker himself acts as the source for the display of ethics that we see at the end of the film. By setting up an abhorrent ethical situation where he expects people to act in a calculating fashion, the Joker provides an opportunity for them to break out of calculation. He confronts them with the logic of their



Harvey Dent embodies the promise of heroism without a mask, but this is a promise that he will betray.



Dent feels no fear because he is certain of his own ethical purity. This certainty does not save him from turning into a criminal.



Early in the film, Harvey Dent's coin serves as the objective correlative for his self-confidence.

scheming taken to its endpoint, and this creates the possibility for a recoil from scheming, which is what occurs.

The Joker is the ethical center of *The Dark Knight* because he manages to challenge the hegemony of calculation that controls Gotham and to show that another world, a world where ethical acts are not part of a scheming calculation, is possible. Of course, the Joker does horrible things: he stabs a pencil through a man's eye; he blows up a hospital; he kills countless people; and so on. By placing the Joker at the ethical center of the film, Nolan does not exculpate him for these deeds nor celebrate them. He shows rather that there is a certain necessary violence behind all ethical acts. They must violently wipe away the predominating world of calculation that underlies and pathologizes all obedience to the law. Though he is himself a figure of evil in the film, the violence of the Joker takes aim at the radical evil present in typical obedience to the law — the fact that we obey the law, as Kant notes, for reasons other than the law itself. The Joker's evil provides the basis for any ethical heroism because it highlights and strives to eliminate the evil of calculation that defines the subject's original relation to the law. He thereby constitutes the ground on which the ethical act can emerge.

## The hero's public face

Just as *The Dark Knight* illustrates the inextricable relation between heroism and evil, it also undermines the idea of the hero who can appear as heroic. From early in the film, Batman proclaims his desire to step aside in order to cede his position to someone who can be heroic without wearing a mask. He sees this possibility in the figure of Harvey Dent. But the film shows that there is no hero without a mask — and, more specifically, without a mask of evil. As Slavoj Žižek puts it,

“The properly human good, the good elevated above the natural good, the infinite spiritual good, is ultimately *the mask of evil*.”[20][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Without the mask of evil, good cannot emerge and remains stuck the calculation of interest; without the mask of evil, good remains scheming. This is precisely what Harvey Dent evinces, despite the promise that Batman sees in him for the perfect form of heroism.

Throughout the beginning part of the film, Harvey Dent seems like a figure of pure good. The purity of his goodness allows him to never be nonplused. Even when a mobster tries to shoot him in open court, he calmly grabs the gun from the mobster's hand and punches the mobster in the face. After the punch, we see Dent's expression of total equanimity, even in the midst of an attempted assassination. This coolness stems from his absolute certainty that events will ultimately follow according to his plans. The rapidity with which Nolan edits together the threat from the mobster and Dent's response minimizes the spectator's sense of danger. The threat against Dent's life disappears almost before we can experience it as such, which suggests that it lacks a quality of realness, both for Dent and for the spectator. The court scene establishes him as a hero whom one cannot harm. Ironically, the





The coin that Dent flips becomes two-sided after the Joker destroys his life.



Dent confronts Ramirez about her corruption, and he spares her life on the basis of a coin flip.



In the figure of Dent, we see the hero becomes a criminal when confronted with trauma.



Gordon and Batman decide to show only the heroic side of Dent and lie

superhero in the film, Batman, shows himself to be vulnerable when he first appears in the film, as dogs bite him through his protective armor. This distinction between Dent and Batman's vulnerability explains why the former cannot be an authentic hero.

In contrast to Batman, Dent's heroism does not involve the experience of loss and is based on a repudiation of the very possibility of losing. Bruce Wayne adopted the identity of Batman after the trauma of being dropped in a cave full of bats and the loss of his parents, but no such traumatic loss animates the heroism of Dent. He is heroic through an immediate identification with the good, which enables him to have a purity that Batman doesn't have. No rupture and subsequent return animates his commitment to justice. He can publicly avow his heroic actions because he performs them in a pure way, without resorting to the guise of evil. But the falsity of this immediate identification with the good becomes apparent in Dent's disavowal of loss, which Nolan locates in the tic that marks Dent's character — his proclivity for flipping a coin to resolve dilemmas.

On several occasions, he flips the coin that his father had given him in order to introduce the possibility of loss into his activities. By flipping a coin, one admits that events might not go according to plan, that the other might win, and that loss is an ever-present possibility. Though the coin flip represents an attempt to master loss by rendering it random rather than necessary or constitutive, it nonetheless ipso facto accedes to the fact that one might lose. Dent first flips the coin when he is late to examine a key witness in court, and the coin flip will determine whether he or his assistant Rachel will do the questioning. When Rachel wonders how he could leave something so important to chance, Dent replies, "I make my own luck." It is just after this that the mobster tries and fails to shoot Dent, further suggesting his invulnerability.

Dent wins this and subsequent coin flips in the first part of the film because he uses a loaded coin, a coin with two heads. When it comes to the coin flip, Dent does make his own luck by eliminating the element of chance. The coin that he uses ensures that he will avoid the possibility of losing. The coin with two heads is certainly a clever device, but it also stands as the objective correlative for Dent's lack of authentic heroism. The immediacy of his heroism cannot survive any mediation. Once loss is introduced into Dent's world, his heroism disappears, and he becomes a figure of criminality.

The transformation of Harvey Dent after his disfigurement is so precipitous that it strains credulity. One day he is the pure defender of absolute justice, and the next he is on a homicidal warpath willing to shoot innocent children. One could chalk up this rapid change to sloppy filmmaking on Christopher Nolan's part, to an eagerness to move too quickly to the film's concluding moments of tension. But the rapidity of the transformation signifies all the more because it seems so forced and jarring. It allows us to retroactively examine Harvey Dent's relationship

about his criminality.



Batman turns Dent's face in order to indicate the decision to lie.



Batman takes on the image of evil and agrees to make himself into the target of the police. His exceptionality becomes criminal.



Gordon smashes the Bat Signal in order to indicate Batman's new position in relation to the law.

to the law earlier in the film.

Dent becomes Two-Face after his injury, but in doing so he merely takes up the identity that police department had adopted for him when he was working for the Internal Affairs division. As an investigator of other officers, Dent earned this nickname by insisting on absolute purity and by targeting any sign of police corruption. Even Gordon, an officer who is not corrupt, complains to Dent of the paralyzing effects on the department of these tactics. On the one hand, an insistence on purity seems to be a consistently noncalculating ethical position. One can imagine this insistence obstructing the longterm goal of better law enforcement (which is why Gordon objects to it). On the other hand, however, the demand for purity always anticipates its own failure. The pure hero quickly becomes the criminal when an experience of loss disrupts this purity.

This first occurs when Gordon is apparently killed at the police commissioner's funeral. In response to this blatant display of public criminality, Dent abuses a suspect from the shooting and even threatens to kill him, using his trick coin as a device for mental torture. Even though Dent has no intention of actually shooting the suspect, Batman nonetheless scolds Dent for his methods when he interrupts the private interrogation. This scene offers the first insight into what Dent will become later in the film, but it also shows the implications of his form of heroism. Dent resorts to torture because his form of heroism has no ontological space for loss. When it occurs, his heroism becomes completely derailed.

Rachel's death and his own disfigurement introduce traumatic loss into Dent's existence. Nolan shows the ramifications of this change through the transformation that his coin undergoes during the explosion that kills Rachel. The explosion chars one side of Dent's two-headed coin (which he had earlier flipped to Rachel as he was taken away to jail), so that it becomes, through being submitted to a traumatic force, a coin with two different sides. The film indicates here how trauma introduces loss into the world and how this introduction of loss removes all subjective certainty.

When Dent as Two-Face flips the newly marked coin, the act takes on an entirely new significance. Unlike earlier, he is no longer certain about the result of the flip. He flips to decide whether he will kill the Joker in the hospital room, whether he will kill Detective Wuertz (Ron Dean) in a bar, or whether he will kill Detective Ramirez (Monique Curnen) in an alley. Of the three, only Wuertz ends up dead, but Dent also kills another officer and the criminal boss Maroni, along with some of his men. This rampage ends with Dent holding Gordon's family hostage and threatening to kill the one whom Gordon holds most dear. Dent becomes a killer in order to inflict his own experience of loss on others: he tells Gordon that he wants to kill what is most precious to him so that Gordon will feel what he felt. Dent can so quickly take up this attitude because his heroism has no place for loss. When it occurs, the heroism becomes completely undone.

After Dent's death, the film ends with Batman accepting responsibility for the killings performed by Dent in order to salvage Dent's public





When he takes on the image of the criminal, Batman transforms himself into the Dark Knight. This is the key ethical gesture of the film.



The only possible heroic exception involves a hero who adopts the image of evil. Otherwise, the exception multiplies itself and multiplies the injustice that it fights.



Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* simply celebrates the exceptionality of its title figure.

reputation and thereby sustain the image of the public hero. Gordon and Batman believe that this gesture is necessary for saving the city and keeping its hope for justice alive. When Gordon says, "Gotham needs its true hero," we see a shot of him turning Dent's face over, obscuring the burned side and exposing the human side. In death, Dent will begin to wear the mask that he would never wear in life. A mask of heroism will cover his criminality. As the film conceives it, this lie — that purity is possible — represents the sine qua non of social being. Without it, without the idea that one can sustain an ethical position, calculation of interest would have nothing to offset it, and the city would become identified with criminality.

But the real interest of the film's conclusion lies with Batman and the form of appearance that his heroism takes. It is as if Batman takes responsibility for Dent's act not to save Dent's face but to stain his own image irrevocably with evil. He remains the heroic exception, but his status changes radically. In order to guarantee that Dent dies as a hero, Batman must take responsibility for the murders that Dent committed. With this gesture, he truly adopts the mask of evil. In the closing montage sequence, we see the police hunting him down, Gordon smashing the Bat Signal, and finally Batman driving away into the night on his motorcycle. As this sequence concludes, we hear Gordon's voiceover say,

"He's the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now. And so we'll hunt him, because he can take it. Because he's not a hero. He's a silent guardian, a watchful protector ... a dark knight."

As Gordon pronounces the final word, the film cuts to black from the image of Batman on his motorcycle. The melodrama of this voiceover elevates Batman's heroism, but it does so precisely because he agrees to appear as evil. This gesture, even more than any of his physical acts of courage, is the gesture of the true hero because it leaves him without any recognition for his heroism. For the hero who appears in the form of evil, heroic exceptionality must be an end in itself without any hope for a greater reward. When the exception takes this form, it loses the danger that adheres to the typical hero. The mask of evil allows the exception to persist without multiplying itself. By adopting this position at the end of the film, Batman reveals that he has taken up the lesson of the Joker and grasped the importance of the break from calculation. Dent, the hero who wants to appear heroic, descends into murderous evil. But Batman, the hero who accepts evil as his form of appearance, sustains the only possible path for heroic exceptionality.

In an epoch when the law's inadequacy is evident, the need for the heroic exception becomes ever more pronounced, but the danger of the exception has also never been more apparent. Declarations of exceptionality abound in the contemporary world, and they allow us to see the negative ramifications that follow from the exception, no matter how heroic its intent. Audiences flock to superhero movies in search of a heroic exception that they can embrace, an exception that would work toward justice without simultaneously adding to injustice in the manner of today's real world exceptions. In *The Dark Knight*, Christopher Nolan offers a viable image of heroic exceptionality. As he sees, its form of



World Court: *The Dark Knight* asks us to imagine George Bush pursued by the World Court.

appearance must be its opposite if it to avoid implicating itself in the injustice that it fights. The lesson for our real world exceptions is thus a difficult one. Rather than being celebrated as the liberator of Iraq and the savior of U.S. freedom, George W. Bush would have to act behind the scenes to encourage charges being brought against him as a war criminal at the World Court, and then he would have to flee to the streets of The Hague as the authorities pursue him there. In the eyes of the public, true heroes must identify themselves with the evil that we fight.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### Notes

1. The necessarily public dimension of the police officer's identity follows from the public nature of the law itself. A law that was not publicized would cease to be a law, and a state that operated with hidden laws would cease to be a state in the proper sense of the term. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. Film noir represents the aesthetic rendering of what occurs when private interest overruns public law. While public law provides a bond between subjects, the noir universe shows how the triumph of private interest shatters this bond. As a result, one cannot extend trust to anyone in this universe. As Hugh Manon notes, "The view of *noir* is invited to contemplate the objects, people, and events of ordinary daily life in a sinister light." Hugh Manon, "X-Ray Visions: Radiography, *Chiaroscuro*, and the Fantasy of Unsuspicion in *Film Noir*," *Film Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2007): 8.
3. Zack Snyder, director of *300* (2006), turned down the opportunity to direct a Superman film because of his lack of moral complexity. Snyder explains, "He's the king daddy of all comic-book heroes, but I'm just not sure how you sell that kind of earnestness to a sophisticated audience anymore." Qtd. in Scott Bowles, "Are Superheroes Done For?," *USA Today* (28 July 2008): 2D.
4. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 185.
5. Hegel understands the insufficiency of the legal order and the need for an exception, but he locates the exception not in the hero but in the sovereign. He insists on preserving the monarch even in modernity because he grasps the necessity of sustaining the exceptional position outside the law. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).
6. Andrew Klavan, "What Bush and Batman Have in Common," *The Wall Street Journal* (25 July 2008): [http://online.wsj.com/article\\_print/SB121694247343482821.html](http://online.wsj.com/article_print/SB121694247343482821.html). After this article appeared, leftist bloggers (such as Christopher Orr) almost immediately pointed out the central problems with Klavan's thesis — namely that Batman follows an ethic that doesn't allow him to kill anyone no matter how evil the person may be, that Bush has not re-established the boundaries of civil rights as Batman does, and that Klavan wants Bush's heroism to be recognized when the film insists that true

heroism can't be — but there is nonetheless some aspect of the film that invites Klavan's analysis. With its defense of the need for the figure of exception, *The Dark Knight* grants a fundamental premise of conservative (and even fascist) politics.

7. Klavan, "What Bush and Batman Have in Common,"

[http://online.wsj.com/article\\_print/SB121694247343482821.html](http://online.wsj.com/article_print/SB121694247343482821.html).

8. According to Benjamin, the presence of lawmaking violence in a social order does not disappear with the cessation of the violent act itself and the founding of the law. The social order relies on the idea of this violence in order to sustain its functioning. Benjamin notes, "When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay." Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume I, 1913-1926* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996), 244.

9. The question, for the superhero film, is the precise status of the superhero's violence in Benjamin's terms. Is it merely law-preserving violence, a supplement to the violence of the police? Or is it divine violence, the kind of violence outside the law that renders an infinite justice that goes beyond the balancing of accounts? It is according to this opposition that we must judge each act of exceptional violence.

10. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 22.

11. Agamben, *State of Exception*, 2. [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]

12. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. and eds. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 59.

13. As Kant puts it, "Whatever his state in the acquisition of a good disposition, and, indeed, however steadfastly a human being may have persevered in such a disposition in a life conduct conformable to it, *he nevertheless started from evil*, and this is a debt which is impossible for him to wipe out." Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 88.

14. The Joker's aesthetic critique of the morality that rules the other characters echoes Nietzsche's condemnation of what he calls a slave morality. Nolan makes the link between the Joker and Nietzsche explicit during the bank robbery that opens the film. As he places a grenade in the mouth of the bank manager, the Joker paraphrases Nietzsche, proclaiming, "I believe whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you ... stranger."

15. The autonomy of the Joker renders him difficult to understand, even for Batman. At first, he interprets the Joker as just another criminal seeking to enrich himself, but Alfred (Michael Caine) points out the possibility that this interpretation fails to capture what motivates someone like the Joker.

Through a story from his own past, Alfred suggests that the Joker acts for the sake of acting rather than for a goal like money. He tells Bruce Wayne, Alfred: “When I was in Burma, a long time ago, my friends and I were working for the local government. They were trying to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders, bribing them with precious stones. But their caravans were being raided in a forest north of Rangoon by a bandit. We were asked to take care of the problem, so we started looking for the stones. But after six months, we couldn’t find anyone who had traded with him. One day I found a child playing with a ruby as big as a tangerine. The bandit had been throwing them away.” Wayne asks in response, “Then why steal them?” Alfred says, “Because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.”

16. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89.

17. As Alenka Zupancic notes, tracing out Kant’s own logic leads to the conclusion that diabolical evil has the exact same structure as adherence to the moral law. Kant’s rejection of the possibility of diabolical evil — evil for its own sake — stems, according to Zupancic, from his unconscious recognition of this underlying sameness. She says, “*diabolical evil, the highest evil, is indistinguishable from the highest good, and that they are nothing other than the definitions of an accomplished (ethical) act*. In other words, at the level of the structure of the ethical act, the difference between good and evil does not exist. At this level, evil is formally indistinguishable from good.” Alenka Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2000), 92.

18. The bond between Batman and the Joker becomes evident on several occasions. When Batman interrogates the Joker in the jail cell, the Joker tells him, quoting literally the famous expression of romantic love from Cameron Crowe’s *Jerry Maguire* (1996), “You complete me.”

19. The most relentless advocate of utilitarian ethics in contemporary culture is the television program *24*, where federal agent Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) confronts a series of ethical dilemmas and consistently reduces them to quantitative problems in order to arrive at the proper ethical decision. To put it in the Joker’s terms, Jack is a schemer.

20. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 66.[\[return to page 3 of essay\]](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## *The Dark Knight of American empire*

by [Randolph Lewis](#)



Panic on the streets of Gotham USA: the state security apparatus scatters while the Joker launches his anarchistic provocations. Meanwhile the US flag dangles at an impotent half-mast.

Hidden inside the childhood fable of *The Dark Knight*, the newest installment in the Batman franchise, is something very adult. Beneath its glistening surface of latex and metal, asphalt and blood, the film offers an unusually insightful and poetically phrased cultural critique. Along with the *Iron Man*, another blockbuster that subtly explores the price of empire, the new Batman is not simply "a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war," as *The Wall Street Journal* has suggested."<sup>[1]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Some viewers might settle for the macho fantasy that warmed the heart of *The Wall Street Journal*, but I would argue that the new Batman film offers something more interesting: it critically explores the "end of empire," as *The Wire* creator David Simon described the recent U.S. conundrum in which our levees cannot hold, wars cannot be won, and children cannot be protected in an allegedly wealthy, advanced nation.<sup>[2]</sup>



The Joker leers at the hypocritical forces of law and order. Even in jail, it is he who interrogates "the system," not the other way around.



An exploding hospital as the Joker destroys the sacred institutions of the city in his quest for a revolutionary new beginning for Gotham.



The Joker leaves his calling card. His blood-smeared playing card reflects a disturbing blend of violence and play, politics and performance art.

Buffeted by a weak economy, spiraling levels of national debt, interminable chaos in Iraq and Afghanistan, and political scandals too numerous to mention, Americans are understandably yearning, perhaps unconsciously, for an assault on the status quo. "No one knows any longer how dark the night is," the German philosopher Ernst Bloch once wrote.<sup>[3]</sup> *The Dark Knight* shows us this message with surprising insight. Since its release in the summer of 2008, the film has expressed a secret longing for radical change that goes beyond the normal boundaries of our political culture. Along with its teenage fantasy of bulging biceps and smoke-belching cars, the new Batman invites a second fantasy of rupture and revolution, mostly in the form of a leering sadist in faded clown make-up.





Harvey Dent is a public servant who admires Bruce Wayne, or at least the billionaire's capacity to fundraise on his behalf. Here he echoes Rachel's awe-filled gaze at Wayne.



Billionaire Bruce Wayne (aka Batman) enjoying his lifestyle of the rich and famous. Here he meets Harvey Dent, Gotham's initially idealistic District Attorney, who glances up at him reverentially. Yet Batman is already squeamish about his own heroism.



Darkly obsessed with his own failure to control Gotham's fate, Wayne pays no mind to the Russian ballerina whom he has escorted to the dinner. His ex-girlfriend, Rachel Dawes, looks up at the still-heroic man but later she will regard him far more skeptically.

Much ink has been spilled on the splendor of Heath Ledger's final performance as the Joker, but it tends to trivialize his real accomplishment. His intense method acting did not result in a performance that is simply well crafted. Rather, his Joker has a raw political force of the sort rarely seen in U.S. cinema. This new Joker is an anti-capitalist culture jammer who weds sadism and anarchy in a grotesque synergy. The revolution will be televised after all, with the Joker hosting the final reality program of a culture *in extremis*. In fact, in the film, we see snippets of him in this role, almost literally, as he tortures wannabe Batmen for a TV audience.

While we should deplore the violence of the Joker, we can still celebrate his secret promise of rebirth. It is no accident that the Joker attacks our core institutions — banks, law enforcement, city government, and hospitals — rather than looking for quick cash. "It's not about money," he reminds us. "It's about sending a message." The Joker has mastered the spectacle of violence, and he provides a jolt of "shock and awe" in the heartland, as we see the real Chicago repeatedly seeping through the fictional Gotham. "I just do things," he explains, "I'm a wrench in the gears. I hate plans." Far from a terrorist with specific demands, the Joker demands nothing except mayhem. He is a grinning vanguardist for the coming anarchy: "See, I'm not a monster," he explains helpfully, "I'm just ahead of the curve."



The Joker's attack on wealth includes assaulting a fundraiser for Harvey Dent in Bruce Wayne's luxurious penthouse.



Home invasion as Marxist critique: The Joker disrupts the party with his own brand of "creative destruction."



The Joker presents his challenge to the lifestyle of the rich and famous: violence, cunning, and rupture.



The Joker leers at bourgeois pieties like faith, love, and trust as he interrogates Batman's erstwhile lover.



Batman unleashes his high-tech chaos upon the city. It's one of many moments where he seems to damage or even destroy that which he seeks to protect. Christopher Nolan offers a pointed allegory of the war on terror.

For most of *The Dark Knight*, Batman seems baffled by his grinning nemesis. Yet his faithful butler, Alfred, relates the Joker to his own experiences at the end of empire. In Cockney cadences, Alfred recalls being sent with English mercenaries to catch a jewel thief in the forests of Burma. After failing for six months, the mercenaries discovered that the thief was simply tossing away the jewels. Confronted with a criminal who doesn't play by the rules, the system lashes out with indiscriminate violence — by burning down the whole forest. Why? "Because some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money," Alfred tells his young master. "They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn."

The implication for Batman is that his "victory" over the Joker would require the destruction of Gotham, a scenario that would suit the Joker quite well: "Everything burns," the criminal mastermind says as he immolates a billion dollars or so. He is a rupture artist, eager to see the aesthetics of directionless chaos (which, interestingly, he imagines as an egalitarian playing field). "Introduce a little anarchy, you upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos," he tells the district attorney, Harvey Dent. "*I am an agent of chaos! And you know the thing about chaos, Harvey? It's fair.*"

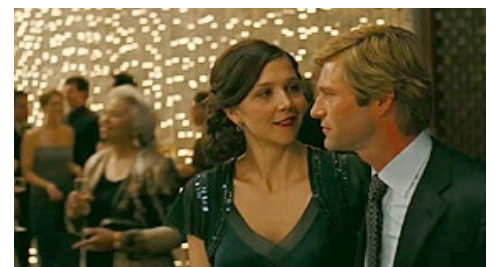
Throughout *The Dark Knight*, the Joker's greatest contempt is reserved for "the rules" of bourgeois society: "I am not a schemer," he says, adding: "I show schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are." Cross-dressed in a white nurse's uniform, he complains, quite humanely, that "the rules" allow for a busload of soldiers to die but not for one local politician. "Nobody panics when things go according to plan, even if the plans are horrifying," he says in disgust. In the spirit of Bakhtin's medieval carnival, this exceedingly angry clown wants to reverse the normal order of things. By targeting politicians, cops, and civilians alike, the new Joker is bringing the war home, and soon the people of Gotham are chanting a new version of an old antiwar protest: "No more dead cops!"



Bruce Wayne in his sartorial splendor: What other country celebrates a depressed billionaire superhero?



Rachel begins to question Bruce Wayne's decency. Vulnerable and worried, she stands for the ordinary American waiting with increasing impatience for a mythic savior.

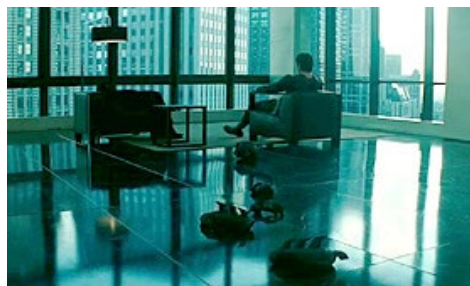


Looking for decency and hope inside the system, Rachel turns her attentions from the renegade Batman to the crusader Harvey Dent. Her involvement with the seeming

reformer ends tragically.

Weary and uncertain after years behind the mask, Batman expresses little enthusiasm for protecting Gotham. If anything, this grim master of machines seems less human than the scarred maniac he opposes. Entombed in his expensive and deadly technologies, including a robotic car set on "intimidation," he is burned-out hero looking for an exit. *The Dark Knight's* unsmiling Batman doesn't "get the girl" (quite the contrary). And other than the company of his aged butler, he is alone in the shadowy urban space of Gotham. Even in his vast modernist armory or his glittering billionaire's penthouse, the new Batman seems sadly aware of this fact. In these moments, he is a lonely symbol of the United States' imperial isolation, a point that conservatives have overlooked in their reading of the film. Michael Caine, the actor who plays Batman's butler, has explained it succinctly: "Superman is the way America sees itself, but Batman is the way the world sees America." [4]. (Is it any accident that the film hinges on the appropriate use of privacy-crushing surveillance technologies that even Batman cannot trust himself to deploy?)

For those who are willing to listen, *The Dark Knight* has a great deal to say about the perils of U.S. empire, but because of its commercial status, the film eventually tries to contain its own radicalism. Director Christopher Nolan might retain some of his "indy cred," but he is neither Dziga Vertov nor Jean-Luc Godard. The radical genie is unloosed to mesmerize the audience with its explosive force, but it is ultimately thrust back into the bottle before the closing credits. In the final reel of *The Dark Knight*, the film veers toward sentimentalism and comforting closure, as the Joker loses his bet against human nature and ends up lassoed by the caped crusader. Warner Brothers has action figures to sell, not revolutions to foment, and so the Joker must be defeated and the good people of Gotham must move forward with the status quo intact. Yet, no one celebrates, and Batman rushes into the darkness, scorned and unappreciated, where he can contemplate his Pyrrhic victory.



Throughout *The Dark Knight*, Batman/Bruce Wayne is depicted in unforgiving modernist spaces. Here the rectilinear grid of his penthouse apartment seems a sterile trap that



Other than his aged butler, Batman is alone in the shadowy urban space of Gotham. At many levels, this new Batman is a symbol of a thwarted, unappreciated, self-loathing



"No one knows anymore how dark the night is," the German philosopher Ernst Bloch wrote. A depressed, postmodern hero, Batman surveys the darkness of Gotham with a growing realization that he cannot win the war on "terror."



adds to his isolation and unease.



superpower.



Batman's suit emerging from its high-tech crypt. Entombed in his expensive and deadly technologies, the new Batman is burned-out hero looking for an exit. His armored suit evokes a grim, high-tech militarism.

A reluctant hero confronts his fate. Batman is a soldier in an endless war on terror, for what else can we call the Joker's bombings?

Boring old Batman might win the day, but ultimately he is Gotham's real villain because his joyless victory brings nothing but another day of the unsatisfying status quo. Just as Milton scholars have complained that the God of *Paradise Lost* was never as compelling as Milton's vision of Satan, *The Dark Knight* suffers the same fate. Grim-faced Batman is a snooze compared to the wild-haired Joker, who seems keenly aware of this fact. "Why so serious?" he taunts his self-righteous opponent.

In his armored suit and explosive armaments, Batman is a high-tech warrior who seems designed for Iraqi deployment. Meanwhile, the Joker is a vivid hybrid of Sex Pistol, Situationist, and Insane Clown Posse — all with the constricted voice of a *Burn*-era Marlon Brando. Not surprisingly, we miss the Joker when he is not on-screen: he is so terrifyingly alive, despite (because of?) his luridly theatrical violence. Schumpeter's fans may wince, but it's exhilarating to watch the Joker's creative destruction in our age of surreptitious self-loathing. The path to utopia goes through the Joker's dystopic rampage.

Like some punk-rock philosopher, the Joker provides the "revolutionary spirit"



Just as the God of *Paradise Lost* was never as compelling as Milton's Satan, grim-faced Batman is dull. "Why so



serious?" the Joker taunts Wayne, who cannot even enjoy the pleasures of the rich.



To attack a bank, the Joker acts with characteristic panache and has his men dressed as killer clowns, once again combining childhood whimsy and grown-up misery in a psychologically astute manner.



Terrifyingly alive, the Joker is a vivid hybrid of Sex Pistol, Situationist, and Insane Clown Posse. How can the contemporary US audience not identify with him?

that can bring us to what Ernst Bloch calls a "radical disenchantment of mythological appearances," a state in which heroes are no longer heroic (that's the point of *The Dark Knight's* ending), a state in which we have "a total lack of illusions." [5] The Joker's real enemy is not the robotic-voiced Batman, for whom he has some sympathy and even warmth — *it is belief itself*. His assault on Gotham, and in particular his corruption of District Attorney Harvey Dent, is designed to undermine any faith in the system, its rules, or its heroes. In the theology of *The Dark Knight*, the Joker functions as a devil who despises faith more than the faithful, even explaining to his victims that his brutal temptations are more academic (to prove a point) than a reflection of personal animus.

Christopher Nolan must have been mulling over such thoughts when he was making *The Dark Knight*. Explaining that the powerful political metaphors in the film were fully intended, he said that "the idea of society breaking down" weighed heavily on him when he was writing the script and that he envisioned the revised Joker as "an agent for change." [6] Nolan and his crew succeeded admirably. Perverse as he is, the Joker offers relief from our quivering life in "Blubberland," the depressingly soft and unsatisfying experience sold to us under the guise of the "good life." According to architecture critic Elizabeth Farrelly, blubberland is where we find

"the track-suited, mind-numbed couch potato, the quadruple-garaged McMansion, the idealized fantasy life of the virtual-reality addict, home alone with a flickering screen in a darkened room." [7]

Blubberland is the world that the Joker despises; it is the world of

"vast, glittering malls and dreary look-at-me suburbs interspersed with limitless acreage of concrete, asphalt and billboards." [8]

It is also a state of mind in which more is never enough. Many-hued Dadaist with an eternal smirk, the Joker is the enemy of the bland, colorless, and unfeeling continuation of the status quo. With his appearance explicitly modeled on the Sex Pistol Johnny Rotten with a hint of Malcolm McDowell's sociopath from *A Clockwork Orange*, the Joker is not just a devil but also a postmodern messiah who inveighs against the discreetly authoritarian order of late consumer capitalism in which brands and regulations have eclipsed the soul. It is a world that even Batman has grown reluctant to defend; the Joker, on the other hand, offers crazed salvation in a future shorn of dull certainties.

My reading of *The Dark Knight* owes a great deal to Ernst Bloch, who deserves more attention in media studies. As one of his admirers puts it, Bloch was a

"political philosopher of the irrational, hermetic Marxist, utopian, encyclopaedist, process philosopher of our immanence in an unfinished world; a densely timed man who cannot be sifted quickly." [9]

Born in 1885, the son of a Jewish railway official in the city of Ludwigshafen, Bloch moved in intellectual circles that included Simmel, Lukács, and Benjamin. In 1918, he published *The Spirit of Utopia*, a "mystical and prophetic work" that blended "messianism, socialism, and ideas of unrevealed spiritual truth" as it weighed the concept of utopia. [10] After time in Zurich, Vienna, Paris, and Prague, Bloch fled the Nazis in 1938, moving to the United States for ten years with his family. During his U.S. sojourn he composed *The Principle of Hope*, a marvelously eclectic and sprawling work, both intimidating and inviting, that reads like a wild blend of Marx and Emerson. [11] Equal parts poetic and philosophical, Bloch's vision was inclusive in the extreme, taking in subjects that ranged from fairy tales to religious mystery, detective novels to utopian dreams.

As a poetic Marxist with an interest in the psychological, Bloch, as one writer has noted, has "an eye for the utopian gleam in phenomena as varied as the circus and the fair, the popular novel and the fashion accessory," all of which come together in *The Dark Knight*.<sup>[12]</sup> For Bloch, radical hope could be found in the most conventional text, from the wild west novels of Karl May that fascinated Hitler to enduring pieces of folklore. Bloch imagined popular culture as a place for daytime dreaming, where utopian hopes could compete with the sober complacency that weds us to the status quo. For Bloch, perhaps, Batman lets us dream of revolution for a few minutes before returning to the familiar softness of our lives.<sup>[13]</sup>

When not viewed skeptically for his sometimes acritical support of the Soviet Union in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Bloch is sometimes disregarded as an impenetrable, almost occult, system builder very much out of synch with the postmodern temper. Having fled the Nazis, Bloch had a guarded appreciation for U.S. culture (he was initially excited by its "very humanistic ideology").<sup>[14]</sup> However, his psychologically-inflected Marxism eventually led him to reject budding postwar U.S. consumer culture and return to Europe, where he became a leading philosopher in East Germany.<sup>[15]</sup> In his most famous work, *The Principle of Hope*, he complained about the smallness of capitalist business culture with a very American metaphor:

"The graceless Babbitt has ruined everything, the courage of the struggle as well as the gaiety."<sup>[16]</sup>

Whatever the Joker is, he is not small. He mocks the courage of the status quo (police who evinced cowardice) as well its gaiety (in his ruined clown make-up). He is upright, un-cowed, implacable to a degree that is unnerving, a shark among minnows, the one man in the film who stands outside of capitalism.



"Everything burns," the criminal mastermind says as he immolates a billion dollars or so. *The Dark Knight's* Joker is a rupture artist, eager to see the aesthetics of directionless chaos.



Lurching in a long coat and shaggy hair the Joker makes his stand against the banality of corporate existence. A Starbucks is on the corner.



The Joker is like a devil who despises faith more than the faithful, saying that his brutal temptations are more to prove a point than from personal



The Joker laughs at Batman as he drops Rachel off the side of a building. Ledger's appearance is modeled on the Sex Pistol Johnny

animus. Even in the "underworld" of Gotham's jail he is unbowed and unrepentant.

Rotten with a hint of Malcolm McDowell's sociopath from *A Clockwork Orange*.

"Not everyone today can be characterized as a fearful bourgeois," Bloch pointed out.[17] And those who do not cringe in fear (quite understandably) are left in terminal ennui, like the über-capitalist of Wayne Industries himself, the billionaire Batman. Only in the United States would a mythic figure, a superhero, be a billionaire industrialist in need of Zoloft. Like those he begrudgingly protects, Batman is a prisoner of the system who yearns for something more. Bloch once wrote that for "capitalist reasons" the United States had become "the land of very limited human possibilities." Only the anti-capitalist Joker offers relief in the world of *The Dark Knight*. He is the catalyst for change, a vision of cathartic violence, a demon whose hell we must step through in order to truly live again.



The Batmobile rains fire across the streets of Gotham. Note that the city seems less a part of a comic book mythology than actual Chicago in 2008, giving additional contemporary resonance to the film.



In his armored suit and explosive armaments, Batman is a high-tech warrior who seems designed for Iraqi deployment instead of something as mundane as solving crimes.



Entombed in his expensive and deadly technologies, including a robotic car set on "intimidation," Batman is a lonely symbol of US imperial isolation.



Batman sails over the cool tones and inhuman contours of contemporary urban planning. His POV is both Godlike (the view from the clouds) and animalistic (the view from the birds in Hitchcock's film of that name).



Michael Caine, who portrays Batman's faithful butler Alfred, offered one of the great political insights about the film's brooding, violent hero: "Superman is the way America sees itself, but Batman is the way the world sees America."



The other side of empire: when the tank-like militarized Batmobile is



An anxious Bruce Wayne en route to a disheartening "Mission



unavailable, Batman cruises Gotham in a high style, \$300,000 Lamborghini Murcielago LP640 Coupe.

Accomplished." Batman's joyless victory brings nothing but another day of the unsatisfying status quo to the citizens of Gotham.



As Batman enacts his own "Patriot Act" with technology that will allow him to spy on all of Gotham's citizens, Lucius Fox argues that the surveillance capability must be destroyed after the Joker is captured. Fox thus functions as something quite rare: those US government officials who act on a principled opposition to administrative abuse of power.

Disappointed with Batman's apparent failure to protect the city, Gotham's police take an axe to the device used to summon the Batman from his cave (or penthouse). This image has two symbolic resonances: one from film, where the angry townspeople kill the symbol of their Frankenstein; and one from politics with the popular rejection of Bush/Batman in 2008.

Many viewers will comfort themselves with safer interpretations, but at some level *The Dark Knight* is speaking to a weary and agitated part of the U.S. psyche that is desperate for change. A Batman movie might seem an unlikely place for such utopian visions, but Bloch reminds us how much radical possibility is embedded in even our most commercial entertainment. One part of our cinematic daydreams is "just stale, even enervating escapism," but the other part is "provocative" and "does not accept renunciation." [18]

Bloch began his *magnum opus* with a series of questions:

"Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are we waiting for? What awaits us?" [19]

Perhaps unconsciously, we no longer look to mythic heroes like Batman and their clumsy imitators in our political system, but to villains like the Joker for the hope that change is possible. We may not be aware of our desire for transformation—it may be stuck in what Bloch calls the "Not-Yet-Conscious" — but our inner longing for something better can find resonance even in a Hollywood blockbuster. [20]

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### Notes

1. Andrew Klavans, "What Bush and Batman Have in Common," July 25, 2008, A15: [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121694247343482821.html?mod=opinion\\_main\\_commentaries](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121694247343482821.html?mod=opinion_main_commentaries).

[[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

2. The Charlie Rose Show, July 16, 2007.

3. Ernst Bloch, *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 317.

4. Michael Caine quoted in Carrie Rickey, "'Dark Knight' Glimmers through Gloom," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 18, 2008, W5.

5. Ernst Bloch, *Literary Essays*, 309. Although Batman is no longer heroic by the end of the film, Gotham's elites still conspire to create necessary illusions for the masses. This incomplete demythologization allows for the apotheosis of Harvey Dent, whose failures are hidden from view (and indeed, assigned to Batman, who becomes a sort of "sin-eater" for all of Gotham).

6. Christopher Nolan quoted in "Q+A Director's Chair," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 1, 2008.

7. Elizabeth Farrelly, *Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008) 10.

8. Farrelly, *Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness*, 10.

9. Wayne Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1982). 1.

10. Translators' introduction to *The Principle of Hope: Volume I*, xxi.

11. As a bibliographic aside, I would direct the reader to several secondary sources that I found helpful. The best guide to Bloch is Vincent Geoghegan's *Ernst Bloch* (NY: Routledge, 1996), which breaks the subject into five parts: "Life and Concepts," "Culture," "Religion," "Fascism and Marxism," and "Natural Law, Utopianism and Nature." Also useful is Wayne Hudson's *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1982), one of the earliest critical appraisals of Bloch's work. Hudson's chapter on "Marxism and Utopia" (Chapter 2: pp. 21-67) is of particular interest. Finally, the translators' introduction to Bloch's *The Principle of Hope: Volume One* contains useful

biographical information as well as astute critical commentary on themes such as “Bloch and tradition” and “The Style of ‘The Principle of Hope.’” See Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight’s introduction to their translation of *The Principle of Hope: Volume One*, pp. 3-20, which leads the reader to the precipice of Bloch’s own writing. Because few readers have the time to read the three volumes of *The Principle of Hope* in their entirety, it should be some comfort that these books reward even a desultory approach to their immensely varied contents.

Volume One is distinguished by poignant chapters on “What Is Left to Wish for in Old Age” and “What the Mirror Tells Us Today,” as well as sections on Marx, the Ku Klux Klan, dreaming, and medical utopias. Volume Two continues Bloch’s encyclopedic approach with examinations of art, opera, poetry, and philosophy, while Volume Three deals with technology, social change, and the promise of the future, especially if we embrace the generative power of utopian longing. Readers should also be directed to an equally fascinating, and perhaps more accessible, volume called *Literary Essays* that ranges across a vast landscape including film, advertising, wine, Wagner, Venice, Spengler, and the Strasbourg Cathedral. Readers in film studies will find his short pieces on cinema of particular interest: “Significant Change in Cinematic Fables” (59-62), “On Music in the Cinema” (156-159), and “The Musical Stratum in Cinema, Revisited” (159-162). However, it is important to note that many of Bloch’s non-cinematic writings also have relevance to scholars working in visual studies, and for this reason, I offer the above suggestions only as starting points.

12. Vincent Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch* (NY: Routledge, 1996), 5.

13. For Bloch, cultural production is always “simultaneously describing, satirizing, undermining and hoping,” as Vincent Geoghegan puts it in *Ernst Bloch* (NY: Routledge, 1996), 65. The best introduction to how Bloch “accentuates the positive, the utopian-emancipatory possibilities” of cultural texts is in Douglas Kellner’s excellent article, “Ernst Bloch, Utopia and Ideology Critique,” available online at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/ernstblochutopiaideologycritique.pdf>.

Kellner (and Michael Ryan) also wrote one of the first (and still best) books on the politics of popular film: *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). I am grateful for the work of Doug Kellner, which has been foundational for my own writing over the past two decades.

14. Bloch quoted in Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch*, 18. “Very humanistic ideology” appears first in Ernst Bloch, “Disrupted Language, Disrupted Culture,” *Direction*, December 1939, 16.

15. The story of Bloch’s U.S. exile and eventual return to Germany is a little more complicated. During his decade in the United States, he suffered from cultural isolation, political suspicions, and professional disappointment. Despite Adorno’s support, the left-leaning philosopher was unable to secure an appropriate position at an U.S. university. Although Bloch eventually obtained U.S. citizenship in the late forties, he returned to Germany in 1949 with high

hopes for his new academic position in Leipzig. Yet his homecoming was marred by political attacks. Bloch had been initially celebrated as a central voice in German philosophy, but he soon fell out of favor with the ruling state party of the GDR. His ideological troubles prompted him to move to West Germany in 1961, and for the remainder of the sixties he served as a popular mentor to students at Tübingen university. A major theorist of the utopian impulse, which he saw as a propelling force behind socialism, Bloch died in 1977 at the age of 97. In the three decades since his death, his work has gained some admirers outside of philosophy departments, but film studies and media studies have been slow to appreciate his relevance, even though his work speaks eloquently to many issues in visual studies. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight's introduction to *The Principle of Hope: Volume I*, ix-xxxiii.

16. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume III*, trans. Neville Plaice (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 937.

17. Ernst Bloch, *Literary Essays*, 306.

18. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume I*, trans. Neville Plaice (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), 3.

19. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume I*, 3.

20. For more on the "not-yet-conscious," see Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch*, 34. On another point, Bloch argues that "'America' will disappear only after it has been completely discovered — meaning that the revolutionary path goes straight through capitalism, not around it" (*Literary Essays*, 309). Despite the noisy commercial trappings of *The Dark Knight* and the blandishments of *The Wall Street Journal*, a Blochian interpretation suggests that the revolutionary path might run straight through the film.

## Works cited

Bloch, Ernst. "Disrupted Language, Disrupted Culture," *Direction*, December 1939, 16-17, 36.

Bloch, Ernst. *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope: Volume I*, trans. Neville Plaice. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986.

Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope: Volume III*, trans. Neville Plaice. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995.

Farrelly, Elizabeth. *Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008.

Geoghegan, Vincent. *Ernst Bloch*. NY: Routledge, 1996.

Hudson, Wayne. *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*. NY: St. Martin's Press, 1982.

Kellner, Douglas, and Ryan, Michael. *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Kellner, Douglas. "Ernst Bloch, Utopia and Ideology Critique," online at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/ernstblochutopiaideologycritique.pdf>.

Klavans, Andrew. "What Bush and Batman Have in Common," July 25, 2008, A15:  
[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121694247343482821.html?mod=opinion\\_main\\_commentaries](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121694247343482821.html?mod=opinion_main_commentaries)

Nolan Christopher, "Q+A Director's Chair," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 1, 2008.

Rickey, Carrie. "'Dark Knight' Glimmers through Gloom," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 18, 2008, W5.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Jack Starks (Adrien Brody) in John Maybury's *The Jacket*. Because of the Iraq war, a veteran returning home from combat becomes a timely theme again.



John Savage in *The Deer Hunter* (1978). The first important films about Vietnam were not made until several years after the end of that war.



## Post-Iraq cinema — veteran heroes in *The Jacket* and *Harsh Times*

by [Justin Vicari](#)

1.

With increased numbers of servicemen and women returning to U.S. society from war zones in the Middle East and elsewhere, the problem of the veteran's re-assimilation to civilian life has become the stuff of timely cinematic drama. There has been a spate of recent Hollywood films about Iraq, including *Jarhead* (2004), *Rendition* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) and *Stop-Loss* (2008). Most of these films take the somewhat equivocal stance of being “pro-soldier/anti-war.” One either believes in the Iraq war or one doesn't, and it's only humane to be “pro-soldier” when considering the enormous risk these fighting men and women have placed themselves in under the name of a dubious agenda so ill-defined and often mismanaged by the Bush/Cheney administration. But are these films really helping any kind of cause? Or are they symptomatic of a tendency, already becoming deeply ingrained in our media culture, to fictionalize the real and turn it into a kind of escapism that assuages guilt while changing nothing?

Unlike Vietnam cinema, whose first important exemplars — *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) — were not made until several years after the U.S. pullout from Saigon, Iraq war cinema has kept pace with the war itself. This mania for being current, which characterizes our present time, often leads to muddled, undigested statements that mirror the distracted/distracting way in which the real war has been prosecuted and covered. From day one, the invasion and occupation of Iraq have already been promoted, shamefully, as a kind of mass-escapist entertainment (escapism from fears of 9/11 and doubts about U.S. world dominance) and milked for opportunities for jingoistic political spectacle. In a conflict where reporters have been embedded and more or less de-fanged, and where photographs of potentially demoralizing U.S. casualties were criminalized by fiat in the Bush era, we probably need more documentary, and less fictional, evidence about the Iraq experience.

To a great degree Iraq differs from all other “official” wars that the United States has waged, in that many of the coalition soldiers are well-paid contractors who have signed up, not with the army, but with private military firms. In his landmark study, *Corporate Warriors* (2003), P. W. Singer asks whether the recent proliferation of these private firms, with their tendency to exploit warfare for profit and stock-option speculation, is eroding our trust in social institutions. He writes,

“Politics are now directly and openly linked with economic interests (in normative terms, a return to a tymocratic or money-based system of governance), which can lead to breakdown of respect for

Jake Gyllenhal in *Jarhead* (2004). By contrast, Iraq cinema has kept pace with the war itself.



In *Stop-Loss* (2008), veterans come home but cannot leave the war behind. This veteran sleeps in a ditch in his front yard, with his gun in hand.



The veteran's disillusionment has been a theme of many films. In *Cold Mountain* (2003), Civil War vet Inman (Jude Law) returns from the front to sacrifice himself for his community and his love Ada (Nicole Kidman).



governmental authority, and also delegitimizes its right to rule. Or, as one analyst described [it] in more strident terms, "These khaki and Brooks Brothers clad mercenaries endorse the idea that power belongs to those who can afford it." [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Privately contracted armies are like Pandora's box: once sprung upon us, they are unlikely to go away. Singer's only real conclusion to the thorny problem of how to provide international security in a complicated globalized marketplace is that changing times require changing ingenuities. But whatever we might think of wars themselves or the people who inevitably profit by them, one constant remains — that the combat veteran continues to have a difficult and traumatic experience. A figurehead of barely commensurable contradictions, trained both to unquestioningly obey all orders from above and also to kill at will, the veteran can become a painful misfit when he must re-learn how to function beyond the military's strict disciplinary codes. Sometimes he can never re-learn this.

"An employee of a London-based PMF [private military firm] described the motivations that led him to join the [privatized military] industry: 'I joined the Army at 18 and left at 42. What else could I do but be a soldier? . . . What choice do I have?'" [2]

If the nineteenth was the century of industrial capitalism and the twentieth the century of advanced, post-industrial capitalism, then the twenty-first century (or at least its first eight years) seem to be an era of "psychotic capitalism," lacking moral restraint or social conscience. Now single big-grab payoffs are favored over long-term investments, insider trading and illegal deals flourish under cover of respectability, and burnt bridges preempt cultivated business opportunities. The implosion of Wall Street and the investment banking system in the United States (even vaster in implication, perhaps, than the 1929 crash and the ensuing Great Depression) indicate psychotic capitalism writ large, leaving scorched earth rather than arable soil. It is as if the country assumes that whatever crime one can get away with amounts to sound business practice. And again, the effects of gambling with enormous sums of capital, as well as using extreme and potentially criminal methods of reaping and protecting further sums, characterize the privatized military sector, where any multi-millionaire can theoretically buy an army or armed conflict anywhere in the world. As Singer writes,

"In game-theory terms, each interaction with a private actor in the international securities market is sui generis, that is unique, or constituting a class alone. Exchanges take the form of 1-shot games, rather than guaranteed repeated plays." [3]

No longer beholden to the rational, psychotic capitalism runs amok, loses touch with right and wrong, and mortgages a steady, solid future for the adrenalin-rushing ups and downs of today.

And when the larger society suffers from a kind of mental instability, its individual citizens cannot be far behind, particularly those most burdened by having to do the "dirty work," so to speak. We know all too well that combat veterans are subject to lingering psychological after-effects, perhaps most notably post-traumatic stress disorder. This diagnosis came to light in the wake of Vietnam but for all intents and purposes is probably no different than the "shell shock" that afflicted veterans of World War I. Because he can be seen as both an Everyman and an iconoclastic individual set apart from others, the war veteran has had a long history of being both hero and anti-hero in Hollywood cinema. The jaded, vengeful posse in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) are Civil War vets, as is the weary infantryman, Inman (Jude Law), who returns from the

Inman tells Ada about his ordeals in battle: "They kept trying to put me in the ground. But I wasn't ready. Whatever was good in me I shot it dead."



In *The Roaring Twenties*, Cagney plays a World War I doughboy who cannot find legitimate work after returning to the U.S.. The cold-bloodedness of his combat experience leads into a life of crime.



In *The American Soldier* (1970) Fassbinder deconstructs the trope of the warrior in society, purging all vestiges of the detested feminine yet succumbing ironically to a doom brought about by women themselves.

front only to sacrifice himself for the good of his community and the woman he loves, Ada (Nicole Kidman), in Anthony Minghella's *Cold Mountain* (2003). Cagney's vicious gangster in *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) is a World War I doughboy who comes home to an America where he is reviled and denied honest work, while the amoral, emotionally vacant, cold-blooded men who slouch and swagger through the films noirs of the 1940s and 1950s are often veterans of World War II.

Many films argue that a penchant for killing, learned on the battlefield, cannot be unlearned in civilian life; in fact, killing is often the alienated veteran hero's only entrée into civilian society, as a hired gun. Rainer Werner Fassbinder deconstructed this trope explicitly in *The American Soldier* (1970), in which a Vietnam vet is hired by a Munich police department to covertly assassinate its public enemies. He mainly kills women and one effeminate homosexual, so that the entire film reads as a surreal statement on how a hyper-macho (sub)culture, inculcated by war but extended into peacetime, seeks to relentlessly purge from itself all vestiges of the detested feminine element. At that film's end, by way of symbolic retribution, the U.S. soldier's own mother and gay brother inadvertently bring about his doom.

It was World War II that produced what is perhaps the quintessential veteran saga, William Wyler's ironically titled *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). The recipient of numerous Academy Awards, this well-known male-melodrama kaleidoscopes the stories of three returning veterans as they deal with alcoholism, depression, disabilities, and their inability to relate to their families. The film's driving theme is that the soldier's experience of war is one which he cannot share with civilians who have never "been there." This overwhelming feeling of isolation threatens the veterans' stability, sanity, and future potential. The movie is painfully authentic: Harold Russell, one of the lead actors in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, was a real-life veteran who had lost his hands.

Tom Gregory's comments about *The Best Years of Our Lives* are interesting in this regard:

"This is not a film that attempts to wrap up war. It turns its eyes on the returning soldier: lost but hopeful, deflated but not conquered. The nuclear family passes into the Nuclear Age, as salty soldier Al, played by Fredric March, returns to face his son's prodding questions about Hiroshima, along with his wife's whispered telephone calls and mysterious social life. One night while drunk and dancing with his wife, Al starts talking to her like so many 'dancehall girls' he must have boogied with during his years in Europe. His wife plays along, repeating what she imagines so many girls replied to his flirtation. There's no denying the war has executed their innocence long ago. In this one scene Hollywood connects the innuendo and incorruptibility of its earlier days to the reality we still see today." [4]

However uncomfortable some of its scenes might be, *The Best Years of Our Lives* is nonetheless a kind of whitewash, as Jean-Luc Godard noted. Addressing the "myth of death in American cinema," Godard establishes a distinction between two different kinds of mise-en-scene — for our purposes here, a crucial distinction.

"All I mean to claim is that the mise-en-scene of *To Have and Have Not* is better suited than that of *The Best Years of Our Lives* to convey aberrations of heart and mind, that this is its purpose, whereas the object of the latter is rather the external relationships between people. Compare *Wuthering Heights* to *The Best Years of Our Lives* ... and tell me whether the destiny of the modern cinema





Harold Russell, a World War II amputee, received an Oscar for his portrayal of a troubled vet in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946).



*The Best Years of Our Lives*, a quintessential male-melodrama, was one of the first films to examine the psychological difficulties of combat veterans returning to domestic marriages and families.



Chris Marker stops time by creating a film made of still images. *La Jetée*, like *The Jacket*, is about time travel.

does not take the same form as it did for the belated partisans of romanticism.” [5a]

It is overt emotionalism, sentimentality, combined with a flat Norman Rockwell-esque portraiture, that undermines the ostensible subject of *The Best Years of Our Lives*: dehumanization. Of course, those “aberrations of heart and mind” have come to signify our total interest in the arts, to the extent that one could argue they are now as predictable as anything else. But in films about veterans, where there are common elements such as emotional trauma, lingering violence, alienation from the society which the veteran once defended, we can return to Godard’s suggestion that these elements are more powerful when fully internalized by the mise-en-scene rather than externalized as set pieces and soap opera.

Two recent films, John Maybury’s *The Jacket* (2005) and David Ayer’s *Harsh Times* (2007), are an object lesson in this distinction. Both look specifically at the plight of Iraq and Gulf war veterans. Both are high-wire balancing acts, nervy, nightmarish, often stomach-turning. They also feel “ripped from the headlines” in an almost semi-inflammatory way. Writer-director Ayer has insisted: “[*Harsh Times*] isn’t a rap video . . . It’s more realistic.”[5] Likewise, Maybury made these revealing comments about his research for *The Jacket*:

“...I did go to some of the veterans’ hospitals here. They’re not that much better staffed and supported than the place I portray in my film, and that’s what this is about, actually. It’s how your so-called heroes — my heroes, too, my nephews are fighting in Iraq at the moment — they’re treated like shit when this is all over.”[6]

Aesthetically, the films play out somewhat differently from each other. *Harsh Times* is a far more conventional action film, and as such, it somewhat blurs the line between critique and exploitation. It makes the viewer complicit in the titillation produced by scenes of violence and macho posturing. In contrast, *The Jacket* is a comprehensive repudiation of violence on all levels: the violence of war, the violence of crime, the violence of domestic life, and the violence of the criminal justice system. Both *The Jacket* and *Harsh Times* mingle genres rather freely. *Harsh Times* darkens the classic “buddy film” with overtones of gangland noir. More imaginatively, *The Jacket* blends science fiction and politics with romance and family drama to create a unique and iconoclastic vision of contemporary United States.[7] *The Jacket* qualifies as science fiction in that it is a time travel film, and also, in a related way, a film about a restless spirit trapped between death and existence. The granddaddy of such films, and by far the most poetic and groundbreaking of them, is probably Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1966), a short film made up not of live action but a series of oddly wistful still photographs. In a motif begun in Marker’s film, subsequent after-life fantasies such as *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990), *The Crow* (1994), and Terry Gilliam’s remake of *La Jetée*, *12 Monkeys* (1995), the unfairness of a man’s sudden death causes him to come back to life in a kind of limbo state, attempting to redress some painful cosmic injustice and redeem his own thrown-away life.

In particular, *12 Monkeys* parallels and prefigures *The Jacket* in its use of fatalism. In both films, time travel is used to suggest closed circles of eternal recurrence, in which an Everyman figure struggles with the inability to change the outcome of events. In *12 Monkeys*, James Cole (Bruce Willis) is sent into the past from a post-apocalyptic future in which the remnants of the human race have been driven to live underground after a pandemic. His mission is





In *12 Monkeys*, based on *La Jetée*, an everyman is sent into the past to collect data about a pre-apocalyptic world.



In both *12 Monkeys* and *The Jacket*, mental institutions are shown as warehouses of lost souls ...



... and social misfits. They are also way-stations on the heroes' journeys toward redemption.

Substituting a heightened dystopia for a corrupt or untenable reality is nothing new. Science fiction in general has long been recognized as having an affinity with political and social theory. For example, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) can be read as a veiled critique of the racist Nazi philosophy of subhumans ruled by supermen. If the alien-invasion films of the 1950s were largely covert stagings of anxieties surrounding the Cold War and the atomic bomb, then many sci-fi films of recent years could be deconstructed as allegories of life in an era of perceived disinformation. Superficially these films concern time warps and time travel, and they often take their cue directly and indirectly from Asian cinema's use of the horror/sci-fi/fantasy genres to explore social disorder.

For example, Hideo Nakata's Japanese film *Ringu* (1998) became a cult sensation and was remade as a Hollywood film called *The Ring* in 2000. In it, the ghost of an abused girl has become a ghost in the machine of technological society, sending her nightmares from beyond the grave in the form of a mysterious video-cassette whose gruesome images kill anyone who watches them within a week's time. Curiosity triumphs over caution, and one by one the circle of people exposed to the deadly tape increases. Slaves to a culture industry which already indoctrinates them to passively accept what the media presents, the characters are willing, at least at one point, to pay the appointed price for having watched the forbidden tape:

"Why not just let things run its course, are our lives really worth saving? Why don't we let our line die out?"

Having lost hope in the future, the present is ready to shrivel up into the past. Likewise, *Dark Water* (2005) is a remake of another Nakata film, *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (2000). In both versions, a single mother facing dire financial straits moves her young daughter into a rundown apartment that happens to be haunted by the ghost of an orphaned little girl. The past returns to swallow up the mother and daughter when the ghost demands that one of them sacrifice herself to become the dead girl's playmate in eternity. As Nina K.

Martin has written about *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*:

“... the [economic and emotional] backlash against single working mothers is a global issue. The portrayal, struggle and redemption of [the film’s] female protagonist is contingent on her acquiescing to and embracing an idealized feminine role — the self-sacrificing mother. Visual tensions connote this struggle between the normally clean, safe realms of the home and school, and the invasive ‘dark water’ that floods Yoshimi and Ikuko’s apartment, streaming down walls and relentlessly boring through ceilings. This overwhelming force not only dissolves the barriers between the living and the dead, the safe and the threatened, but it also renders the typically stable walls of the apartment building porous and permeable. The water’s intrusion into the security of the home reflects the bleeding of social roles that contemporary Japanese women must face as they juggle work with motherhood.”[8]

Put otherwise: as reification of the heartless demands which capitalism places on the underpaid and overburdened, both versions of the film drive the hard-working, well-meaning mother to ensure her daughter’s safe future by giving up her only and final possession — her own life. The relentless, seeping invasion of the water could also be read as a metaphor for wire-tapping and spying on ordinary citizens within their homes. We see that the most abused victim of psychotic capitalism is identical to the innocent who takes up residence in a haunted house, the poltergeist of which, an ambassador of antimatter, seeks to co-opt the living resident into its own limbo state. Adorno, who detested those genres which passed off horror and murder as entertainment, wrote:

“After the breakdown of the detective story in the books of Edgar Wallace, which seemed by their less rational construction, their unsolved riddles and their crude exaggeration to ridicule their readers, and yet in so doing magnificently anticipated the collective imago of total terror, the type of the murder comedy has come into being. While continuing to claim to make fun of a bogus awe, it demolishes the images of death. It presents the corpse as what it has become, a stage prop. It still looks human and is yet a thing, as in the film ‘A Slight Case of Murder,’ where corpses are continuously transported to and fro, allegories of what they already are. Comedy savors to the full the false abolition of death that Kafka had long before described in panic in the story of Gracchus the hunter ... What the National Socialists perpetrated against millions of people, the parading and patterning of the living like dead matter, then the mass-production and cost-cutting of death, threw its prefiguring shadow over those who felt moved to chortle over corpses.”[9]

Those “living” patterned and paraded “like dead matter” were clearly the Nazi troops themselves, every German man, woman and child subsumed under uniform, armband, ideological straitjacket. Certainly the veterans in both *The Jacket* and *Harsh Times* are similarly men for whom life and death have become conflated: already dead or doomed even when they seem to be superficially alive.

Still other examples indicate how political controversies have been explored in recent genre films, mainly science fiction. For example, *The Lake House* (2006) was adapted from the South Korean film *Siworae* (2000) by Eun-Jeong Kim and Ji-na Yeo. In it, a couple fall in love even though they are actually living two years apart from each other; they are connected by a “magic” mailbox in which they receive letters written to each other from the past/future. Under the surface of being a harmless, even sappy love story, *The Lake House* raises issues

about what can and cannot be believed or trusted, as well as the fatalistic idea (again) that the past cannot save the future nor vice versa. Similarly, in *Premonition* (2007), a woman knows that her husband will die in a car accident on a given day but can do nothing to prevent it. Furthermore, she keeps reliving the last day of his life over and over, only to find him alive again the next day and still facing the same imminent danger. (Coincidentally, both *The Lake House* and *Premonition* star popular actress Sandra Bullock.) Most tellingly, perhaps, in *Déjà Vu* (2006) and *Next* (2007), men attempt to go back in time or forward into the future to try to prevent 9/11-type disasters. In all of these films, ordinary people are forced to accept a difficult and inexplicable piece of knowledge at some cost to their sense of peace, order and sanity. The world as they have comfortably come to accept it is revealed to be more chaotic and unstable than they had assumed. They also have the added problem of ultimately being unable to *prove* this knowledge to those around them, again a possible allegory for a U.S. constituency that has the vague persistent feeling of being lied to about a whole host of issues: election fraud, Enron, Worldcom, torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, the deceptive pretext for the invasion of Iraq, the suspect “friendly-fire” death of serviceman Pat Tillman, and even our possible foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks themselves.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## 2.



*The Jacket's* nuclear family: the mother is passed out drunk, the father is a ghost, and the child is left to fend for herself.



At night Jack is gagged and drugged by orderlies.



The images of Jack being bound and placed into the morgue drawer are highly uncomfortable, and nearly images of rape.

*The Jacket* opens during the “Desert Storm” Gulf War of 1991: only minutes after the ceasefire is called, U.S. soldier Jack Starks (Adrien Brody) is shot in the head by an Iraqi boy to whom he has tried to reach out. Next we see him back in the United States, amnesiac and on the road, where he helps a drunken woman, Jean Price (Kelly Lynch), whose truck has broken down and who is passing out in the snow. He also befriends the woman’s neglected child, Jackie (Laura Marano), and significantly gives her his army dog-tags.

Subsequently, in an abrupt turn of events he is framed for the murder of a State Trooper and receives a life sentence in a hospital for the criminally insane, where he falls into the hands of the sinister Dr. Becker (Kris Kristofferson), whose radical treatments involve outright torture. Jack’s mouth is duct-taped, he is strapped into a straitjacket and injected with drugs, then buried alive inside a morgue drawer. The intense panic and claustrophobia is meant either to hurl Jack back upon himself and get him in touch with his “guilt” — or, quite simply, to kill him. The *actual* effect of Dr. Becker’s tortures is that Jack is sent time-traveling. He leaps into the future — a desultory post-9/11 United States — where he encounters the grown-up Jackie (Keira Knightley). Not recognizing Jack as the man who helped her when she was a little girl, she picks him up on Christmas Eve and brings him home to her rundown apartment. Jackie has become a depressed, lonely alcoholic; we learn that her mother burned to death years ago by passing out with a lit cigarette. (The fact that she brings home Jack, whom she meets as a drifter thumbing a ride and whom she views as a stranger, is meant to indicate self-destructiveness.) Jack finds his old dog-tags among her keepsakes, but when he tries to convince her of who he is, she becomes angry and refuses to believe him, insisting that Jack Starks, like her mother, is dead.

Battling against these baffling circumstances that seem out to destroy him, Jack nonetheless conceives a plan to help Jackie. Knowing that the morgue drawer is his time machine, he submits to the experiments (though he expects they will kill him at some point) in order to keep visiting her in the future. In an obvious catch-22, Jack’s insistence that he has seen the future makes him seem all the more crazy to the asylum’s staff, but he slowly wins the trust of the wary but compassionate Dr. Lorensen (Jennifer Jason Leigh). During one of his “trips” in the drawer Jack finally succeeds in confronting Jackie’s mother Jean and convinces her to stop drinking for her daughter’s sake before it is too late. However, just as he has won his victory, he ironically slips on some ice and dies of a head trauma — a moment which Maybury splices together with the original head-wound from the war. The storyline’s convolutions do not end there, however. Seemingly re-resurrected, Jack goes to the future again and encounters a much happier, more well-adjusted and successful Jackie, whose mother is sober and still alive.





Dr. Becker (Kris Kristofferson) prepares Jack's treatment.



In the drawer, Jack has a series of hallucinations, including his own bronze death mask ...



... and the Iraqi boy who shot him.



Medical staff as pallbearers for a patient who is actually a corpse.



Dr. Lorenson (Jennifer Jason Leigh): idealistic but wary.



The asylum is sealed off by a fence whose barbed wire suggests a military prison camp.



The gentle, almost loving actions of a sadist: disturbingly, one realizes that there must have been times when even Mengele comforted his subjects.



"Basic Trust Vs. Basic Mistrust": therapy as sloganeering.

All through *The Jacket*, Jack is little more than a puppet at the mercy of various bewildering and fateful powers. Having already died in vain for his country once, he continues to suffer not as a fallen hero but as a scapegoat, the victim of a kind of absurdist bait-and-karmic-switch. The horrific way he is tortured in his own country is meant to create an interesting note of empathy between U.S. citizens and those who have been profiled, sometimes with a rather broad racial brush, as our "enemies." When asked why he cast Brody, Maybury told an interviewer, "Because he looks like an Arab ... and it sort of had a nice resonance [with] Guantanamo Bay." [10] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) Maybury has also described *The Jacket* as "a romance that has kind of a subtext about Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay." [11]



What is most fascinating about the simulacrum-world that Jack's restless soul inhabits is that it doubles for the real one that surrounds us every day. "I don't know what I believe," Jackie tells him at one point, doubting his claim that he has actually traveled through time; but her admission of skepticism takes on a larger societal resonance. Living in and with two different realities is, again, the untenable position of a society that has lost trust in what its appointed leaders say. Were the torturers at Abu Ghraib acting on orders, or were they "rogue elements?" And if they were the latter, was their behavior tacitly encouraged or condoned? Is torture necessary for our safety, and if so, can that ever justify its unconstitutionality, its betrayal of the Geneva Convention? The pain of such questions seeps under the skin of all conscious Americans and turns us against

Jack takes Jackie to the room where he was tortured.

ourselves and each other.

Indeed, the dead-end lives of *The Jacket*'s characters suggest traumatized, isolated people lacking the will to do anything but drag themselves through their dreary workdays, numbed by booze, nicotine and pills. The film depicts a rabid middle-class concern for public safety, which prompts the dystopian torture of convicted killers with a kind of "eye-for-an-eye" vengeance reminiscent of the Old Testament at its most bloodthirsty. Many script elements connote a social order that seeks to purge all outward symptoms of violence from its individual members, while condoning them within the state apparatus. Outraged, hysterical "law and order" paranoia is everywhere. Thus, when Jack stops to help fix Jean's truck, she sees him innocently hugging her daughter and immediately assuming that he is a pedophile, she screams at him, "Hey, get your fucking hands off my daughter!" The result is a society where everyone feels lost and frightened, keeping others at arm's length. In one of the film's most memorable scenes, Jack and Jackie share a depressing Christmas dinner of stale baloney sandwiches. In contrast to a more saccharine mainstream film, which would probably exalt this kind of poverty fare as "the true meaning of Christmas," this scene plays every bit as dismally and uncomfortably as it sounds, and it ends explosively, with a mistrustful Jackie driving Jack from her apartment, out into the cold.



The adult Jackie (Keira Knightley) stops to pick up a drifter on Christmas Eve.



Jackie does not recognize Jack as the man she met when she was a child.



She offers him a place to stay overnight.



Jackie has inherited her mother's alcoholism, isolation and depression.



Starks finds Jackie's refrigerator is bereft of food ...



... but he sees her freezer is stocked with vodka.



They share a poverty repast of stale baloney sandwiches.

The communities of urban L.A. in David Ayer's *Harsh Times* are equally atomized and broken down, and if anything, they are even more spiritually voided and afflicted by poverty and violence. A veteran of the current Iraq war, Jim Luther Davis (Christian Bale), spends most of *Harsh Times* in a desperate





*Harsh Times* begins with a p.t.s.d. nightmare about combat, filmed in night-vision.



Jim Davis (Christian Bale) has been sleeping in his car in front of his girlfriend's house in Mexico.



Jim's Mexican lover Marta (Tammy Trull) is, somewhat problematically, associated with raw primitivism. She is healthier than the U.S. characters because she acts instinctively and thinks in spontaneous poetry, but she is given little autonomy.

search for identity, security, money, a job. He is really looking for some kind of “peace, love and understanding” though he is far too macho, too drug-addled and stress-disordered to acknowledge this. He divides his time between L.A. and the Mexican village where his girlfriend Marta (Tammy Trull) lives; he hopes to marry her one day. When we first see him, he is sleeping in his car outside Marta's tumbledown shack, apparently too haunted by nightmares of the war to sleep comfortably in her bed. His dream sequence is tinted the swamp-green of army night-vision goggles; it was filmed with “a mini-DV military night-vision scope,”[12] according to director Ayer. Some of the soldiers are camouflaged in tribal-looking animal pelts with skulls for faces, while Jim wears surreal gloves decorated with skeleton hands. The editing here is reminiscent, in a less avant-garde way, of the violent motorcycle-race montage from Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964). Like Scorpio in that film, Jim is seemingly both within the thick of the fray and outside of it, instigating and directing it from the sidelines with a serene, self-satisfied smile — an almost subliminal suggestion of his latent psychosis.

Back in L.A., Jim looks up his best friend Mike Alonzo (Freddy Rodriguez), who is trying to lead a middle-class life with his girlfriend Sylvia (Eva Longoria). She is a successful prosecuting attorney who constantly pressures the slacker-like Mike to get a nine-to-five job. A textbook definition of “bad influence,” Jim takes Mike out on a binge of drinking, drugging, and petty thievery, during which they obsessively cruise the streets in Jim's new Ford — all he has to show for his military pay. Throughout *Harsh Times* this car serves as Jim's armor on wheels, the hard shell he uses to fend off the world.

Jim is hoping to get hired by the LAPD but gets turned down after failing the psychological tests. (Given the LAPD's documented propensity for violence, this is one of Ayer's more mordant jokes.) Instead, Jim is courted by the Federal Department of Homeland Security — it turns out they are looking precisely for killers and sociopathic cowboy types to head up a new anti-drug task force in Colombia. “We're all a little goofy around here,” Senior Agent Richards (J. K. Simmons) tells him. The Colombian task force is a covert operation that may be on behalf of a private military firm. Although Ayer does not specify this, something sinister and conspiratorial is implied by Jim's recruitment scene. (Mike seems to recognize that Jim has already been fighting for capitalist ventures in the Middle East when he asks at one point, “Who did you kill? Commies?”)

According to P. W. Singer:

“At least seven U.S.-based military companies are active in the ongoing conflict in Colombia. Many claim that these private corporations, such as DynCorp and EAST Inc., ostensibly hired by the U.S. State Department to help in the antidrug effort, are actually going well beyond such tasks, including engagements in counterinsurgency operations for the government.”[13]

Singer goes on:

“The intent of privatized military assistance [in Colombia] is to bypass Congressional oversight and provide political cover to the White House if something goes wrong. ... Although U.S. military personnel are under strict legal restrictions from engaging in



Jim's new Ford is both status symbol and traveling armor on wheels. It is almost a character in the drama.



Jim mock-spars with his best friend Mike (Freddy Rodriguez). *Harsh Times* is a compendium of macho behavior.



A bad influence, Jim offers Mike a bottle of beer on a day when Mike has promised his lover Sylvia (Eva Longoria) that he will stay sober and look for a job.

counterinsurgency operations, it is clear that the firms are not bound by the same rules. DynCorp's operations in Colombia entail more than crop dusting, but also engage in combat with the local FARC rebels." [14]

Balding, paunchy and leather-jacketed, the task force recruiter (Fred Sheehan) literally emerges from the shadows. He says, "You were getting paid to fuck people up," as an unromantic synopsis of Jim's service in the Middle East while we look at a series of photographs of a masked, flak-jacketed Jim standing over bodies in what appears to be an abattoir. It is clear the feds want Jim to function outside the law, to "shoot first and ask questions later," with little or no accountability.

"I'm always fascinated," Ayer has said, "by the dark corners in which decisions get made and lives get changed." [15] In fact, Jim's life is changed a great deal by the cabalistic meeting: as a requirement for joining the task force, he is told he must give up all plans of marrying Marta. In a moment that feels like a pact with the devil, he sacrifices her, reasoning, "This is my career, I got one shot." Meanwhile, Mike lucks into a dream job when he discovers one of his old drug connections working at a corporation where he has gone for an interview.

In high spirits, Jim and Mike round up their buddy Toussant (Chaka Forman) and drive down to Mexico for one last blow-out weekend. There Jim, hovering near a total mental collapse, experiences a psychotic break when Marta tells him she is pregnant. In a tense, disturbing scene, he pulls a gun on her and holds it to her neck. She bravely challenges him to pull the trigger, they struggle, and she escapes from him. Their party spoiled, the three men leave to go back to L.A..

Jim has secretly smuggled a large cache of drugs across the border and tries to coerce Mike into helping him unload it. The deal goes horribly wrong, and Jim, feeling himself thrown back into a combat situation, ends up gunning down four men, three of whom are unarmed. Jim himself gets shot while fleeing the scene. The bullet paralyzes Jim's spine; seeing no future for himself, he begs Mike to mercy-kill him. After tearfully refusing at first, Mike finally gives in and fulfills his friend's last wish and then returns, profoundly shaken, to his girlfriend.

### 3.

Actor Christian Bale has already carved out a niche for himself playing boy-next-door psychopaths, most famously the role of Patrick Bateman in Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000). What he brought to the enigmatic Bateman, a kind of blank handsomeness that could turn squirrely-eyed and mean at the flick of a lash, is also what made his Batman the most compelling in the franchise. The same schizoid charm is also on display here, though Jim Davis has fewer moments of calm and repose than Bateman did (or Batman for that matter). Less uptight and upwardly mobile, Jim is a different kind of American psycho, not invested in snazzy business cards or the stiff competition for getting reservations at this week's trendy N.Y.C. restaurant — in other words, not crazed by a wealth of meaningless material options but by a dearth of them. Jim is like a starved jackal prowling a battlefield for corpses. Ayer shot *Harsh Times* on location in impoverished inner-city L.A.: Jim and Mike's impromptu street-jacking of a rival gang takes place in front of a massive prison-like concrete wall topped with rings of barbed wire and spray-painted with a huge graffiti tag. This gritty context is crucial to Jim's character. Just as *American Psycho* ended with a missive from Ronald Reagan, whose covert wars and heartless "trickle-down economics" provided a backdrop for Bateman's own running amok (including cold-blooded slayings of prostitutes and homeless black transients — i.e.,





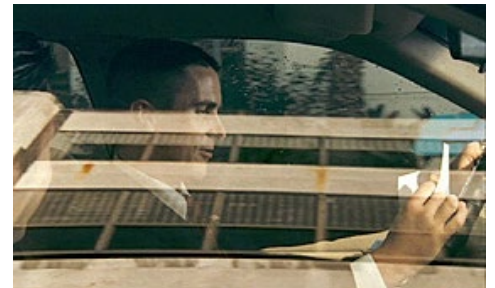
Jim's letter of rejection from the LAPD, who found him mentally unstable.

disenfranchised minorities), so Ayer suggests that Jim is a product of his era.

Jim's also a product of the military; in one scene we see him ironing a dress shirt with meticulous precision. His military training has left him emotionally depleted, rigid; nothing remains behind the mask of his face but another carefully guarded mask. "Sue the military or something" — his buddy Toussant's laconic verdict on Jim's condition — assumes that money can compensate for lost sanity and selfhood. But part of Jim's underlying problem is precisely the way a price-tag is placed so implacably on everything today: human life, suffering, health and well-being.



Shadows of office buildings slide across the windows of Jim's car ...



... subsuming him and Mike in a world which they cannot attain and which controls them from a lofty distance.



Jim jacks Flaco's posse in front of a wall with huge gang graffiti and barbed wire.

Downtown L.A.'s office buildings continuously slide across the windows of Jim's car in a sinister usurpation of his identity. He is literally shadowed and effaced by these reflected skyscrapers where decisions are made every day, disturbing the innocent lives of millions of people while benefiting only a few. Jim's military service has, after all, helped to make other, more untouchable people infinitely wealthier. Indeed, both Jim as well as Jack Starks in *The Jacket* live at the mercy of an older generation of white males who still retain ultimate political and social authority. Apart from Jim, most of the other Caucasian men in *Harsh Times* are "strawman" members of the establishment. There is a white cop who knew Jim and Mike from their youth; when he pulls them over for reckless driving, he lets them off the hook and tries to pal around with them, eager to go out clubbing some night, but they only snicker at him behind his back.

In fact there are two kinds of white men presented in *Harsh Times* — the establishment type who holds some badge of power, and the hipster (Jim) who is on intimate terms with people of color though also capable, we note, of pulling a kind of "racial/neocolonial rank" on them at any given moment. Robbing Flaco (Noel Guglielmi) and his gang at gunpoint, Jim slurs the manhood of one of the Hispanics, disdaining to take his new shoes because of his "little bitch feet." Aware of his place in the chain of white command, Jim is often cowed by the older white men. Thus, in a scene where he is trying to beat a lie-detector test by clenching his buttocks, the examiner (Barry Colvert — not an actor but a real-life polygraph expert) spots what Jim is doing and tells him, "Son, I've been doing polygraph examinations since you were swimming in your daddy's balls, so I know all the tricks." The suggestive language here places Jim in a moment of Oedipal crisis, forcing him to play the devalued son to an all-knowing, omnipotent father figure.

When handed a plastic cup for his urine sample and asked if he can fill it, Jim



The polygraph exam: applying for a federal position is equal to being treated, by default, like a criminal.



Waiting in line for a job interview ....



... Jim shoves an Asian man out of his way. For Jim, might makes right, and although he pals around with Hispanics and African Americans, his white skin still seems to represent, for him, a kind of entitlement.

snaps to attention: “I can fill a goddamn trash can, sir!” His essence, his inner life — the film implies — is itself already the stuff of refuse matter. Random, spontaneous acts of violence are the only things that make Jim feel temporarily alive. And although we recognize this as a cliché stretching back through a slew of postmodern fiction (Camus’ *The Stranger*, Bataille’s *Blue of Noon* and *L’Abbé C*, Mailer’s *An American Dream*), a certain amount of cliché and stereotyping *must* lay heavily over most of the characters in *Harsh Times* and *The Jacket* since, as people, they exist mainly as allegories, aggregates of statistical surveys and the expected odds.

They are people who have lost their subjectivity and become little more than objects in an object world. In *The Jacket*, the alcoholic Jean will fall asleep with a cigarette and immolate herself; no other fate can possibly await her dissolute life. Closing the inevitable circle, her daughter Jackie will grow up to repeat the same patterns of lonely isolation and substance abuse. Only Jack, who has already died, is able to recognize the true value of life, which the living overlook and deny or are prevented from experiencing fully. Like a guardian angel he makes it his mission to awaken some lost subjectivity in the doomed mother-and-daughter pair. “Sometimes I think we live through things,” he says in voiceover, “just to say that they happened ... to me and not to someone else.”

But this independent, autonomous “me” — swallowed up in the production-consumption nexus, exploited and commodified — is increasingly difficult to define. In *Harsh Times* we see that Mike has internalized the idea of material success as the basis of self-worth: there is a scene where he comes home to reconcile with Sylvia after fighting with her; he has just landed a job and stands in front of the TV to get her attention. “You aren’t made of glass,” she tells him reprovingly. “No,” he says proudly, armed with the official employees’ handbook that he holds out like a passport at a border check, “I’m made of *me*.” However, because he has tried to locate his sense of self in a corporate job that represents capitulation to the social order as such (in which, as a Latino, he is already a minority), he claims an autonomy that is still severely qualified.

[Go to page 3](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## 4.



In *The Jacket* Jack confronts Dr. Becker outside the doctor's church.



Jack tries to run away from the asylum, but is pursued by Dr. Lorenson.



Jack at the end of his rope.

The role of religion in society is central to both *The Jacket* and *Harsh Times*. Jack Starks in *The Jacket* is portrayed as a Christ figure, crucified by a society that has misinterpreted religion itself by focusing only on greed, power and violence. In contrast, the pious, self-righteous Dr. Becker is convinced that he is doing God's work by torturing convicted killers to death. "Maybe God will pick up where the medicine leaves off," he tells Jack, who responds, "Are you sure you know where to find him?" *The Jacket* offers a frightening vision of a society in which passive belief is no longer considered enough. In this way, the script alludes to the end-of-days fervor of the Evangelicals, whose most radical exponents have spoken on TV (on mainstream cable news shows as well as Christian-network programs) about the need for Christians to act out against "sin" wherever they see it or else fear the Lord's wrath on Judgment Day. I view such machinations on behalf of God's justice as negative proof of faith and belief. That is, similar to the way Dr. Becker sadistically "plays God," contemporary Christian activists who wage war on abortion clinics or advocate the forced conversion of Muslim countries into "Christian democracies" are clearly not people of superior faith but people *who have less of it*. No longer content to allow God to mete out his own justice or no longer absolutely certain that he will or even can, they now view it as their duty, in this world and through their own power, to bring about the judgment of God as they interpret it. In this vein, most neo-fascist survivalist groups, including the U.S. terrorists responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing, have been militantly Christian.

It would seem that the current popularity of Evangelical Christianity lies precisely in its insistent return to the most primitive of religion's magic-thinking, tribal, obsessive-compulsive tendencies — superstition, the irrational power of the symbolic, the literalization of Scripture and other relics, etc. — all of which emerge as palliatives in a society given over to stress, persistent "amber alerts," and the general uncertainty of survival. Moreover, in all of this the Evangelicals are not very different from Islam at its most jihadist. Indeed, any religion that wishes to thrive today must become a religion of war, must present itself around some kind of "burning bush," in order to overcome the widespread erosion which scientific enlightenment has wrought (however unintentionally) against the public life of faith. We have arrived at a moment in social-historical evolution when, given the choice between progressing *beyond religion* or skulking back toward some primal, Dark Ages moment, Christianity has chosen the latter path with a vengeance. At one point in *The Jacket*, as Jack confronts Dr. Becker in front of the doctor's Protestant church, Becker desperately insists that he was only trying to help the disturbed patients who ended up dying under his care. "You're haunting yourself, old man," Jack tells him. The greater the misapplication and misuse of social power, the stronger the need for "fixes" of pious redemption.

*Harsh Times* takes place in a less sanctimonious world. Jim says of himself at one point, "I am a soldier of the Apocalypse," justifying the mayhem which he has wreaked in the Middle East and which he intends to wreak on Colombian villages in the future. But if Jim is portrayed as religious — alongside his affinity for violence, killing, drugs and indiscriminate sex — there is a cynical side to his





In *Harsh Times* Jim gropes a female at gunpoint in a way that suggests the sexual humiliation of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib.



Stoically, Jim inserts a turkey baster into his penis and flushes his bladder with saline in order to beat a drug test.

penchant for calling on God. God exists only as long as he is on Jim's side, only as long as he can be used to justify Jim's excessive self-will and power-tripping. At another point, while speeding out of control down the freeway, Jim bellows, "Fuck you, God! You ain't got the fucking balls to take my ass!" The wrathful warrior God — the only kind that makes sense to Jim, or the only kind he has been inculcated with, as a young white male in these early years of the millennium — is himself a creature of his own violence, and can presumably be bested with superior violence, superior wrath.

Finally, "God" is just one more old white man whom Jim has tried to scam, or whom he has dealt with confrontationally or obsequiously on a daily basis (Agent Richards; the polygraph expert). Having murdered so many people, Jim correctly assumes, at least by Old Testament standards, that his own power is partially, by definition, equal to God's. At the film's end, when he is begging Mike to shoot him, he says to Mike, "It's just you, me and God" — significantly uttering the word "God" while we see a close-up of the blood-smeared gun which he places in Mike's hand. To Jim, for whom power is itself a religion and religion is adhered to precisely because of its "bad-ass" Medieval connotations (punishing people for their perceived wrongdoings, sending people to Hell, assuming a show of omnipotence, etc.), it is entirely appropriate to see God as a firearm.

Daily life in L.A. — where random murders are shown to be routine — is nearly as fatalistic as the war zone about which Jim still has nightmares. Yet, if only because life is so difficult and deadly for everyone, Jim is expected all the more to just "get over" his wartime experiences. No one in *Harsh Times* feels safe. One of the film's subplots concerns Jim's efforts to sell a stolen pistol to various friends of his; although no one can afford the three hundred dollars to buy it, they all admire it greatly and express a keen desire to have it for their protection. In this sense, we see that warrior culture has become universalized. Even Sylvia is a kind of soldier, "uniformed" as an attorney in a classy suit-dress when we first meet her: "I have a court appearance," she explains, practically with a thousand-yard stare.



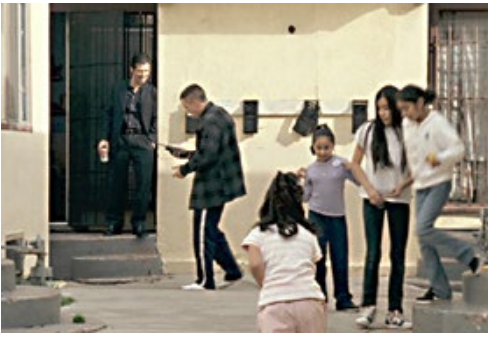
A number of the female characters, including Sylvia ...



... have their boyfriends' names tattooed ornately on their backs.

This toughness of the female characters is a motif of *Harsh Times* — a number of them, including Sylvia, have their boyfriends' names tattooed ornately on their backs. According to director Ayer, this is "something you're gonna see in the 'hood, something that happens."<sup>[16]</sup> [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) At one point, fed up with Mike lying to her, Sylvia tells him: "I'd rather you hit me." Street-gang symbology and behavior — rather than being confined to a teen underclass subculture — persist in adults who have already entered the well-policed zones of the social order as such. Intriguingly, *Harsh Times* poses the





This scene of children playing outside Jim's apartment is perhaps the only moment in *Harsh Times* that could be described as light or happy, and it seems to be a metaphor for the increasing Hispanicization of the United States.

sociological question of what happens when a whole generation of urban “gang-bangers,” raised largely in the streets and outside the law, makes its way into the corporate work force, as some of them will do and surely have done already. Even so, Jim finds that he still cannot exist in contemporary United States because of the more extreme nature of what he was exposed to overseas, or perhaps because of a greater fragility on his part, which he conceals behind bravado and a learned code of macho behavior.

Likewise, Dr. Lorenson in *The Jacket* seems to suffer from a kind of battle fatigue. Trying to treat men who have been locked up (with the key thrown away) has numbed her nearly beyond all empathy and made her close in upon herself; again, we see that she reaches out to Jack only very warily. She asks him, at one point, what 2007 will be like, and he tells her, “Not much different from now ... at least for someone like me,” meaning someone who has seen combat and also someone who is considered pathological.



This shot of Kelly Lynch (left) seems to mirror the famous image of pioneering avant-garde and feminist filmmaker Maya Deren ...

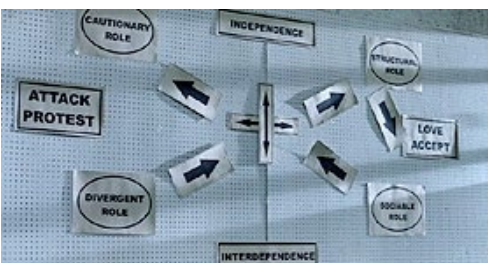


... from her film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Like *The Jacket*, *Meshes* is about the circularity of time, destiny and eternal recurrence.

Everything is unstable and on the verge of falling apart. Goodbyes, in particular, are difficult and painful in *The Jacket*: they play as moments where someone is leaving and most likely never coming back. (One close-up of Kelly Lynch waving from behind a stained-glass window reflecting a cloudy sky seems to be a tribute to a similar shot in *Meshes of the Afternoon* [1943], a film about circularity and eternal recurrence, directed by pioneering feminist surrealist filmmaker Maya Deren.)

## 5.

“There is another reality, of which you are unaware”: this could be the motto of both protagonists, Jack and Jim; Jack in his after-life, supernatural mysticism, and Jim in his more prosaic commerce with covert ops and military secrets. We are torn between an awareness that as citizens, we do not fully know the truth about everything our government is doing and an uncertainty about whether or not we even *want* to know, whether we can “handle the truth” — the memorable cry from *A Few Good Men* (1992), a very different kind of military film about the abuse of institutionalized power and the cheapness of individual lives. In the process, we slip more and more into widespread societal repression, a syndrome



An Orwellian diagram: do the conflicting arrows lead toward mental health or away from it?



Jim and Mike spend their days drinking, stealing, and getting high.



Jim irons his dress shirt with military precision.



Applying for an office job, Mike discovers that one of his old gang buddies already works there. What happens when an underclass, raised in the streets and forced early into crime, makes its inevitable way into the system? This interesting question is

to which both of these veteran heroes fall victim. Peacetime society not only does not want to know what they did in the war but wants actively to forget and repress the war itself as if it never happened in the first place. ATTACK PROTEST reads one particularly Orwellian sign posted in a therapy room of the hospital in *The Jacket*. And, as one character from that film cynically puts it,

“Half the shit that happened in Operation Desert Storm can’t be tidied into a top-of-the-hour headline. Couldn’t be said neatly. Couldn’t be said at all.”

As one of the asylum inmates in *The Jacket* poses the issue:

“I’m in here because they say I have a nervous condition — well, here’s my question. Who wouldn’t be nervous if they really, really looked at their lives? I mean, whose life is really that good?”

Our current lives are obsessed with income and cut-throat competition, the empty tokens of status and consumerism “at best,” grueling daily survival at worst. The characters in *Harsh Times* are particularly concerned with outward signs of material success, far more so than with any sense of their inner lives. For the men it is hard to say whether economic or biological determinism has the upper hand. They are given to spewing drunkenly, “We’re men, right? This is what men do,” or “We’re dogs, we’ve got each other’s back” — affirming among themselves a sense of entitlement which the world is not always ready to extend. Complaining that their job interviews are not going well, Jim says, with characteristic psychopathic aggression, “Next time, just fuckin’ slap ‘em around, get some respect!” “Yeah,” Mike agrees, “pack the Nine [a nine-millimeter automatic gun].” It’s both poignant and scary that the two men feel they can only recover their individual will through adolescent fantasies of using naked brutality to get what they want. A scene that was written for *Harsh Times*’ script but never shot sheds even more light on this, as Ayer describes it:

“There was also another scene in the original script that I took up at Sundance initially, where Jim and Mike beat up one of Sylvia’s coworkers. They put on ski-masks and jump him in the parking lot because he’s been making passes at Sylvia. That ended up not going into the movie, because it was a little too hardcore.”[17]

I’m not surprised that the increasingly corporate heads at Sundance recoiled in horror from a scene where naked thuggery rears up in an *echt*-corporate setting, but this scene might have been the most important one in the film. Not only would it have illumined the difficulty warriors sometimes experience in re-adjusting to peacetime society (and how this becomes all of society’s problem), but it would have been a startling metaphor for how in the United States the membrane between clean and dirty work, thuggery and legitimate business, is already thin. Even crime is simply a reification of that work ethic underpinning all human industry. “Not a bad day’s work,” Mike says, appraising his and Jim’s stolen haul approvingly. In fact, crime equals a work ethic *plus* an illusion of subjectivity and freedom, a shortcut through that thicket of intersubjective social life that leaves Jim and Mike feeling like machine parts.

Only in Mexico is an experience of peace and freedom depicted as even possible — the simple life of the Mexican peasants, who live in shacks with no running water but who speak in spontaneous poetry and are close to unspoiled nature, is set apart from the hectic materialism of the United States. Is it patronizing — or worse yet, racist — to attach a kind of nostalgic charm to a barely subsistent way of life? One must always be suspect of the romanticization of poverty on the subcontinent when conspicuous consumption at its most blatant lies right across the restricted border. In one of her characteristic earthy-mystical



raised by *Harsh Times* but regrettably not explored.



Jim and Mike smoke crack.



Peace of mind is only possible, briefly, in Mexico; but Ayer's romanticization of poverty is suspect.



Flying into rage, Jim threatens to shoot Marta after she reveals to him that she is carrying his child.

moments Marta tells Jim, “When you are gone, your image in my mind sustains to me,” to which the cynical rationalist Jim obtusely responds, “Try eating.” His assumption, coming from a land of plenty, is that she always has food readily available, which may or may not be true. However, what the Mexican characters lack in material well-being, they seem to gain in psychological health. Their way of life is seen not as one of random moments but as a kind of continuity, a whole cloth sundered only by the violence of Americans; whereas American life is seen as being mortgaged, again and again, to fleeting instants of immediate gratification.

*Harsh Times*’ racist overtones are unmistakable. Although Jim does seem drawn to the escape Marta provides from the grubby demands of materialism, he also makes racist and sexist references to “Mexican chick voodoo.” Even more tellingly, he exclaims angrily, “I bet it’s cause I’m white!” when the LAPD rejects his application, expressing the idea, commonly held among racist whites, that white people are being kept down in the U.S. through “affirmative action”-type social programs. We know that in the service Jim killed Arabs and, as virtually the only embodiment of young white manhood in the film, he is also shown terrorizing Asians and Hispanics, including, by the end of the film, his best friend Mike and his girlfriend Marta. The scenes where Jim holds a gun to Marta’s throat and then, later, to Mike’s temple — with obvious neocolonial power lines drawn around a white man terrorizing persons of color — recall the physical and psychological abuses of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. In both cases, Jim’s violent reaction is completely incommensurable with what has provoked it. In fact, both Marta and Mike are reaching out to Jim at just these moments: Marta has just told him that she is carrying his child, while Mike is trying to caution Jim about the huge drug deal he is planning. In Jim’s final neocolonial rampage he guns down four Hispanic males before being shot by one of the dealers while trying to drive away. Indeed, almost as if by supernatural design, the bullet unerringly penetrates the taillight of Jim’s speeding car, the back seat, the front seat, and then Jim’s spinal column, blasting apart the extended metaphor of car-as-armor which has been so central and recurrent in the film.

“I am going to lose my life one day, why not at the hands of the man I love?” Marta tells Jim in Mexico, and it is a courageous, poignant challenge, issued symbolically by the entire Third World itself, in the shadow of the United States and dependent on unstable, often fickle and self-interested U.S. support. There is otherwise an absence of feminist awareness in *Harsh Times*, coming even from the female characters themselves. Sylvia is an interesting character whom one wishes were more developed by *Harsh Times*’ script. Ayer has called her an “almost thankless role.”[18] In this, the female characters are both reducible, again, to social types who act according to their given roles and options. One senses that Ayer wants, on one hand, to romanticize Sylvia and Mike’s union as being somehow exceptional but also to make them generically true to a macho Latin culture in which women, even a college-educated lawyer like Sylvia, are supposed to submit routinely to the will of their men. Significantly, too, in the Mexican sequence, Toussant notices Marta and her mother scrubbing clothes on a rock by the river and asks Jim and Mike, “Hey, shouldn’t we be helping them?” to which Mike responds: “We’re men, they know we don’t do that shit.” An unconscious reason for imperialism is tapped into, here, in that European male colonial settlers had, for centuries, sought comfort in the more traditionally-based customs of native populations, customs which the Enlightenment had already begun to render problematic within white European culture itself.

But the cultural exchanges go both ways,. In this sense, the ending of *Harsh Times* — Mike’s mercy-killing of Jim — can be read as an allegory of the increasing and perhaps inevitable Hispanicization of the United States.

According to national surveys, Hispanics are the only segment of the U.S. population currently reproducing at rates sufficient to replenish their own numbers in the coming generations. The birth rates of all the other ethnicities, especially whites, are falling off and in decline. Although diverse in their own backgrounds, nations of origin, beliefs and customs, Hispanic Americans may yet outlive white America's late-imperial obsession with entitlement and the disastrous wars and foreign policy blunders this obsession has led to. "You're always doing stupid shit, I gotta fix it," Mike shrieks, trying to work himself up to be able to end his now-paralyzed friend's misbegotten life. "You want me to fix your fuckin' head once and for all?" Mike's words ring true on a symbolic level, as the moment when colonized minorities come to awareness of the fact that they must do the dirty work for and clean up after the "bad-brained" imperialists, dead-ended in power and corruption. The touching shots of Hispanic children playing in the street outside Jim's L.A. apartment — some of the only light-hearted and hopeful moments in this very dark film — can also be read as an image of an increasingly non-white U.S. future.

## 6.

It is impossible to lose oneself or take pleasure in Maybury's depiction of various hells-on-earth. Partly this is because *The Jacket* is a superior film artistically to *Harsh Times*, surer of its tone and development, even when that tone is nuanced and that development decidedly non-linear. Maybury limits any raucous pyrotechnics to a few key scenes, instead allowing dialogue-free passages and deceptively tranquil long shots to bring out the alienation of his characters and the sinister tone of the film in general. In contrast, *Harsh Times* often gets caught in the cross-hairs of its own ambition. There is, to be sure, the kernel of a much better film buried within it. Like many Sundance movies by young writer-directors, it feels at times like an overdeveloped project, the script reworked and rewritten again and again according to suggestions from committees, until the filmic end result seems both busy and lacking any spontaneity. (This problem afflicts many would-be filmmakers today when films are extremely expensive to make: knowing they may not get a second shot at the director's chair, they tend to throw everything but the kitchen sink into a pet project.) In spite of what Ayer has said about not being flashy, the movie twitches with unnecessary shock cuts and glorified film-school moments; every mood is heavily underscored. A more subtle, concise director might have allowed his bleak urban landscape and the behavior of his characters to speak for themselves. But as it is, many of the characters in *Harsh Times* spew such constant verbiage that they belie any sense of isolation or depression which Ayer seems to suggest is their abiding state. To an extent, Ayer's first script, *Training Day*, was similarly gimmicky but benefited from a better sense of pacing by the director as well as the charisma of star Denzel Washington. Nonetheless, as a kind of Geiger counter of veterans' issues, both *The Jacket* and *Harsh Times* raise numerous interesting points.



Jim tries to sell a handgun to his friend Toussant.

The military in general is famous for saying that it "owns" its men — mind, body and spirit. Even after leaving the army, both Jack Starks and Jim Luther Davis find themselves controlled and exploited. Jack's torture in the asylum is like a reification of the way he was sent over to the Gulf to die in the first place. Retroactively, Jack's awareness that his life was always already cheap and disempowered leads him to see himself — in his hellish after-life limbo — as someone whom society has flushed away since he's now filling a wretched bed in a broken-down, forgotten ward. Likewise, in *Harsh Times*, some of Jim's abuses are inflicted on him externally, as when the federal agents make him choose between his mission and his planned marriage to Marta, a kind of psychological torture that feels designed simply to test Jim's unswerving loyalty.





"God" is a gun in a blood-soaked hand.

More often, though, we see that Jim is *self*-destructive, reckless with his own well-being, like a lingering after-effect of his conditioning as a soldier expected to put his life on the line at all times. In order to beat a urinalysis drug-screen, he guzzles vinegar straight from the bottle (this nauseates Mike), then, incredibly, inserts a turkey-baster into his penis to flush out his tainted bladder with saline solution (he nonchalantly calls this "a little trick I learned in the service"). After grimacing and groaning in pain, Jim buries the agony of this auto-catheterization with the stoical, matter-of-fact statement, "That was . . . unpleasant." We see that Jim's extreme conditioning as a machine or a kind of animal sets him definitively apart from the civilian (if not the civilized) world. Ayer has said:

"[Jim has] done things that he simply can't share with his friend, and that's part of his problem."[18]



Mike returns to Sylvia, profoundly shaken, and she accepts him back.

In this, Jim also functions as a stand-in for the United States in these complex times: What are the issues that threaten us the most, how are we to define our national security and what are the most effective ways of achieving it? There are few clear-cut answers to these questions, and much of the rhetoric swirling around the debates stems from investments, both financial and ideological, in one sort of agenda or another. Thus, contemporary United States could be said to be, in some ways, as self-deluded and as keyed in to short-term fixes as Jim.

Ultimately, veterans' issues should transcend partisanship no matter what ideologies underpin them. Jack, the "do-gooder" hero who would have to be defined as liberal in his efforts to expose the corrupt asylum for its illegal abuses, and Jim, who would have to be defined as nothing less than a right-wing hawk, are both more or less doomed. The fact that they both die violently and young says much about how we unconsciously view the future. Added, then, to depicting poverty, isolation, mutilation, battle fatigue and post-traumatic stress disorder, both these films acknowledge as well that the returning veteran is plagued by loss of self, shown in wrenching moments when the dazed soldier awakens to wonder who he even is, and what he has really been fighting for.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

[1] P. W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 226 [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

[2] Singer, *ibid.*, p. 76

[3] Singer, *ibid.*, p. 159

[4] Tom Gregory, *The Huffington Post*, August 21, 2007

[5a] Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard* (Translated and edited by Tom Milne; Da Capo Press, Inc.: New York, 1986), p. 28

[5] David Ayer, DVD commentary for *Harsh Times* (Crave Films/Genius Products, LLC., 2007).

[6] Interview with Rebecca Murray on the website, *About: Hollywood Movies*

[7] The genre-shuffling does not end there: *The Jacket* is also loaded with psychedelic digital-effects sequences that take us inside Jack's hallucinating mind, like a somewhat milder version of "drug-cult movies" such as Nicolas Roeg's *Performance* (1970) or Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980), while at the same time delivering a message about drug use as a life-destroying dead end.

[8] Nina K. Martin, "Dread of Mothering: Plumbing the Depths of *Dark Water*," *Jump Cut* no. 50, Spring 2008.

[9] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (Translated from the German by E. F. N. Jephcott; Verso: London, 2002), pp. 232 - 233. Gracchus the hunter died after falling from a cliff while stalking a chamois, but the ship that was meant to carry him to the underworld has lost its way; so Gracchus remains inert but fully conscious, doomed to sail all over the earth looking for his own burial place.

[10] Murray, *ibid.* [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]

[11] Murray, *ibid.*

[12] Ayer, *ibid.* *The Jacket* also begins with green-tinted night-vision footage of war — U.S. planes strafing target sites with bombs, bodies exploding — which Maybury sets to composer Brian Eno's ironically delicate, wistful, Satie-

like piano music. (Eno first collaborated with Maybury in 1978, when Maybury assisted Derek Jarman on the dystopian punk-rock musical, *Jubilee*.) This motif of night-vision could be seen, in both *The Jacket* and *Harsh Times*, as a metaphor for seeing into “dark corners,” and perhaps for uncovering secrets and disinformation.

[13] Singer, *ibid.*, p. 14

[14] Singer, *ibid.*, pp. 207-208

[15] Ayer, *ibid.*

[16] Ayer, *ibid.* [[return to page 3 of essay](#)]

[17] Ayer, *ibid.*

[18] Ayer, *ibid.*

[19] Ayer, *ibid.*

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## WALL-E:

## from environmental adaptation to sentimental nostalgia

by [Robin L. Murray](#) and [Joseph K. Heumann](#)



Earth from space opens *WALL-E*.



Termite skyscrapers.



WALL-E at work.

*WALL-E* (2008) opens deep in outer space, and as the camera draws closer to Earth, the music and lyrics from one of *Hello Dolly*'s love songs, "Put on Your Sunday Clothes," accompany and highlight the cosmos, galaxies, and stars. "Somewhere Out There" amplifies our view of Earth from space. But as we get closer to the landmasses and oceans of Earth, they are obscured by brown and gray floating masses of space garbage that become clearer as the shot moves toward a cityscape piled with skyscrapers built from trash. They look like enormous termite hills between vacant buildings in an empty city devoid of sound except for the roaring wind and a rolling object playing "Put on Your Sunday Clothes" as it picks up and compacts garbage.

These contrasting visions of Earth introduce the two conflicting ideologies that ground the film's rhetoric, those of Disney and Pixar Studios. Although produced and released by Disney, *WALL-E* reflects the postmodern viewpoint of Pixar Animation studios, the creators of the film, transforming the film and its protagonist, WALL-E into what Paul Wells calls an "American popular cultural artifact [sic]" that has "become the focus of a significant meta-commentary on American consumer values and social identity" (152). By critiquing consumerism so overtly, *WALL-E* also critiques Disney aesthetic and production values throughout much of the film. However, the film also reinforces a conservative romantic ideology found in classic Disney features from *Snow White* forward.

The philosophies driving both Pixar and Disney, then, impact the ideology represented in *WALL-E*. Until the film's end, Pixar's vision resonates in the film and provides a dystopic and mechanistic perspective in which a robot named WALL-E acts as a comic hero who empowers an apathetic, indolent, and lethargic human race on a centuries-long, luxury, solar-system, "cruise ship" vacation. WALL-E helps transform the hell of Earth into a home by following a narrative of environmental adaptation with a clear and cohesive structure that follows an evolutionary pattern focused on place.

This dystopic view is made possible because the Pixar philosophy allows a director's vision to take precedence over studio ideology. According to "The Pixar Philosophy,"





WALL-E at work.

"The fundamental difference at Pixar, unlike other environments with this melting-pot of collaboration, is that the director is always the final word here no matter where the notes come from, whether they're from the studio, anybody. The director ultimately pays attention to all of that and then he or she makes the decision and moves forward with it, so it still remains a singular vision even though you have all of these wonderful high-level collaborators."

The director has final decision-making power, and story drives the computer animation, according to Karen Paik's *To Infinity and Beyond! The Story of Pixar Animation Studios*, helping Pixar maintain aesthetic and narrative integrity. Andrew Stanton, co-director of *A Bug's Life* (1998) and director of both *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *WALL-E* (2008) explains the benefits of this stance in an interview with Paik:

"Every time I look at *Toy Story*... I see how strongly it shows the stamp of John's [Lassiter's] personality, but there are also these moments where I go, that's Lee, that's Pete, that's Joe, that's me. I knew Pixar was this thing that came together with all of us. The great chemistry was that we knew how to be a group that forwarded John's vision.... In my mind, *Nemo*'s very cohesive with the other films because it was born from the same group. But it's a real big billboard of, 'This is what you get when I drive.'" (Paik 225)



Remains of Buy-N-Large Gas Station.

Stanton's vision shines through in *WALL-E* as well. In both *Finding Nemo* and *WALL-E*, as well as in *A Bug's Life* (1998), nature and the environment take center stage: *A Bug's Life* explores an ant's attempts to save his colony from human-like grasshoppers; *Finding Nemo* looks at human intervention from under the sea, while *WALL-E* examines it on both Earth's surface and onboard its floating cruise ship. The values presented here support Pixar's emphasis on letting the director "drive."



Remains of Buy-N-Large Big Box Store.

Other values *WALL-E* illustrates, like "romantic devotion and monogamy" and "hard work, faithfulness to duty" or denigrating "passive dependency" (Allen, "Wall-E doesn't say anything"), seem drawn from a Disney scorecard and appeal to both liberal and conservative audiences. Neal Gabler sees Disney animation providing a space in which Disney (in early films) and his viewers "would ultimately find nurturance, love, independence, and authority" (217). From a conservative perspective, "Movieguide," a "ministry dedicated to redeeming the values of the mass media according to biblical principles" calls *WALL-E* "exemplary." According to the Movieguide review, *WALL-E* reflects a

"strong Christian worldview without mentioning Jesus that tells a story about no greater love has any person than to give up his or her life for his or her neighbor."

From the liberal side, *The New Yorker*'s David Denby calls *WALL-E* a "classic" that "demonstrates not just the number but the variety of ideas



Remaining newspaper message of doom.

you need to make a terrific movie.”

Thus, in spite of the conflicting politics behind these reviews, *WALL-E* appeals to both liberal and conservative audiences. Liberal audiences seem to be drawn to the blatant environmental message of the film based on its (at least initial) critique of over-consumption and the capitalist economy perpetuating the humans’ cruise above the planet. Bob Mondello of NPR notes, for example, that Staphanie Zacharek of “Salon.com” calls it “an environmental cautionary tale.” Cinephiles like Kirk Honeycutt seemed to react to the homage to silent comedies, as does Peter Travers when he notes how WALL-E and Eve share a relationship that evokes “Charlie Chaplin’s *Little Tramp* and Virginia Cherrill’s blind flower girl in *City Lights*.”



Axiom on hologram billboard.

Conservative Christians feel the film fills a wholesome niche, valorizing values like conservation. Charlotte Allen, a conservative reviewer for *The Los Angeles Times*, for example, asserts that “if *WALL-E* is didactic, what it has to teach is profoundly conservative. For starters, the film never even goes near the climate-crusading vocabulary of “global warming,” “carbon footprints,” or even “green.” Allen suggests instead that



Promise of paradise on the Axiom.

“the crime of how humans vacate Earth isn’t failure to drive a Prius but strewing detritus. Conservatives detest litterbugs and other parasites who expect others to clean up after them. *WALL-E* champions hard work, faithfulness to duty and the fact that even a dreary job like garbage-collecting can be meaningful and fulfilling.”

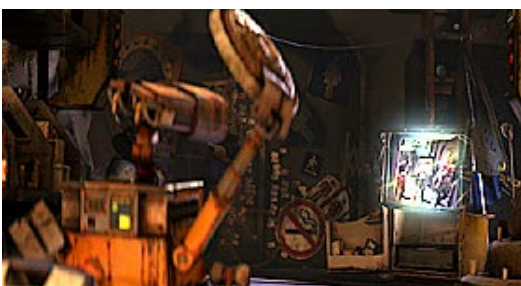
According to Allen, the film “isn’t denigrating consumerism but passive dependency.” And, Allen continues, the film “celebrates Western civilization.”



WALL-E watches *Hello Dolly*.

For us, *WALL-E* presents the most powerful environmental statement made by either Disney or Pixar studios: We must protect earth and its resources because leaving it behind cannot effectively preserve humankind. Instead, humankind remains only because it is artificially sustained and separate from the natural world it ruined and then rejected until a robot named WALL-E intervenes. Compared to other recent Disney animated films such as *Home on the Range* (2004), *Chicken Little* (2005), or *The Wild* (2006), and dystopic science fiction movies of the 20th Century, however, *WALL-E* draws on nostalgia to strengthen its argument that not only has humanity destroyed earth, but that humans — with the help of the robot left to clean up the mess — can and should restore it to its more natural previous state.

Although many reviewers note the film’s nostalgic appeal, however, none of them connect this nostalgia with nature. Instead, they highlight WALL-E’s nostalgia for human artifacts without connecting those artifacts with the natural world. Bob Mondello’s NPR review notes *WALL-E*’s homage to Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, stating he is “just as gratified by their look back 70 years to silent movies as [he is] by their look forward 700 years to a silent planet.” A. O. Scott declares the film “Chaplinesque in its emotional purity” and notes WALL-E’s “collection of treasures, including Zippo lighters, nuts and bolts, and a Rubik’s cube” as evidence that “some of that stuff turned out to be





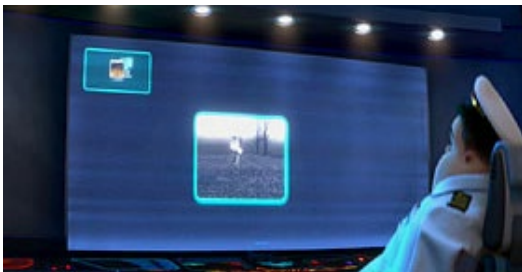
WALL-E dances to *Hello Dolly*.



Axiom passengers personally connect after meeting WALL-E.



WALL-E preserves the refrigerator plant.



The Axiom captain views images of Earth.

useful, interesting, and precious. And some of it may even possess something like a soul." And David Denby calls the film "a work of tragic nostalgia," asserting,

"In the ruins of a great American city, WALL-E, a robotic trash collector and compactor, continues to go about his duties after the human presence has been blown away by billowing waves of noxious dust. Accompanied only by a cockroach, WALL-E trolls among the detritus of the vanished culture; the junk items he finds become fetishes for him. He holds on to plastic forks, hubcaps, and Zippo lighters, and throws away a diamond ring while keeping the felt box."

Yet he too connects this nostalgia only to human artifacts — consumer goods that might be found at Buy N Large, the "box store" that controls Earth and its space station, the Axiom.

For us, on the other hand, *WALL-E* supports its environmental rhetoric in two ways: It draws on three types of nostalgia that ultimately point to images of nature as both individual and collective eco-memory, and it explores WALL-E's movement from tragic to comic ecological hero, an evolution of environmental adaptation that coincides with that of nature, according to ecocritics like Joseph Meeker.

Nostalgia has been critiqued, reified, and recovered in the past few decades, with a resurgence of research in memory studies complicating negative views of nostalgia built on postmodern views. Postmodern responses to nostalgia critique its move toward essentialism. In her 1988 article, "Nostalgia: A Polemic," Kathleen Stewart engages postmodern cultural critics' views that see nostalgia as a social disease. According to Stewart,

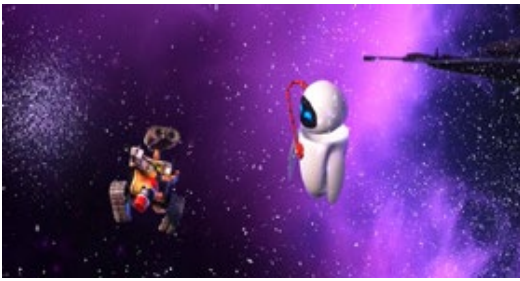
"Nostalgia, like the economy it runs with, is everywhere. But it is a cultural practice, not a given content; its forms, meanings, and effects shift with the context — it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present" (227).

Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Jonathan Culler, Donna Haraway, Fredric Jameson, and Raymond Williams, Stewart elucidates why nostalgia is such a powerful rhetorical tool, as well. Stewart argues,

"On one 'level' there is no longer any place for *anyone* to stand and nostalgia takes on the generalized function to provide some kind (any kind) of cultural form" (227, emphasis Stewart's).

According to Stewart, then, nostalgia serves as a powerful rhetorical tool that placates and paralyzes the disenfranchised:

"Nostalgia is an essential, narrative, function of language that orders events temporally and dramatizes them in the mode of 'that's that happened,' that 'could happen,' that 'threaten to erupt at any moment'" (227).



WALL-E and EVE dance in space.



WALL-E and EVE hug.

Stewart considers the seductive nature of nostalgia in a postmodern culture not only as culturally situated but as reductively negative, resulting in what she calls mirages — either a “grand hotel” of affluence or a “country cottage” of romantic simplicity. For Stewart, then, nostalgia is a negative consequence of attempting to replace postmodern relativism (labeled good) with an essential past based in recovery of a “self” (labeled bad).

From the perspective of these earlier cultural critics, there is a vanishing point of striving and looking for the pure or untouched, unpolluted past, projected into the wilderness of the past of history. But that really is an ideological project. Much of the past, in terms of today’s environmental issues, is substantially lost because of population explosion, irrevocable global warming, loss of biodiversity, and unknown effects of pollution. Each year people born will not remember the same past as previous generations. Our own literatures consider — through the lens of nostalgia — themes like the vanishing Indian, the disappearance of the buffalo, and the disappearing prairie, in relation to Frederick Jackson Turner’s recuperative thesis of the frontier, a thesis that promotes progress at any cost, whether it be genocide or the expansion of industrialism in the United States.

More recent work, especially in anthropology and cultural studies, however, complicates visions of nostalgia as inherently and inescapably bad. In fact, nostalgia may itself prove a way not only to learn from the past but also to recuperate real community. In Ethel Pinheiro and Cristiane Rose Duarte’s 2004 article, “Loaves and Circuses at *Largo da Carioca*, Brazil: The Urban Diversity Focused on People-Environment Interactions,” for example, nostalgia in the form of collective memory and appropriation is what “led *Largo da Carioca* to survive in spite of all the political and urban changes.” This Carioca Square provides a space in which artists and performers share their talents, creating a social center that harks back to plazas of ancient civilizations. Pinheiro and Duarte drew on both an historical evolutive approach and participant-observation data. Historical-evolutive research demonstrated that the open plaza maintains functions from Ancient Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia, especially those related to performance; and participant-observation resulted in interview data that revealed how “people link social activity in the *largo*’s physical structure.”

"Answers to a question asking respondents to 'choose a word that could explain the place' illustrated the pull of nostalgia — one of the terms given to explain *Largo da Carioca*. Others were related, highlighting outdoor performances, culture, and tradition. The piece is esoteric but reveals the positive impact nostalgia might have, actually affecting the city’s shape, ensuring that a people will appropriate a public space for performance and art because their collective memory draws them to it. The power of collective memory —



of nostalgia — seems to be manifested in the continuation of *Largo da Carioca*."

In fact, in the context of *WALL-E*, nostalgia's rhetorical power gains force when contextualized first from a personal standpoint and then collectively, building a community that turns the hell Earth has become into a home.

Nostalgia is manifested in several ways in the film. First *WALL-E* projects human artifacts through a sentimental and nostalgic lens. Then the film harks back to the innocence and heterosexual romance of Main Street U.S.A, as portrayed in clips and music from *Hello Dolly* and homages to other 20th century tunes and films. Here the film reinforces Disney's focus on wholesome monogamous heterosexual relationships. But the film also highlights eco-nostalgic images and rhetorical moves like those in *Soylent Green* (1973), *Omega Man* (1971) and *Silent Running* (1972) or the more recent *Dark City* (1998) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). In all of these films, images of Earth (or an Earth-like constructed planet) from space introduce a collective nostalgia, a memory of a pristine natural world. In *WALL-E*, as in the films it responds to, the camera zooms down, closer toward the landscape and a city that looks like New York, closely imitating *The Powers of Ten* (1968). In the city, nostalgia becomes individualized when the last animated intelligent being on Earth, WALL-E (Waste Allocation Load Lifter-Earth-class), appears, his loneliness showing how vast yet empty a world devoid of nature becomes.

*WALL-E* recalls a variety of apocalyptic science fiction films, but makes most explicit connections with *Silent Running*, *Soylent Green*, *Omega Man*, and *Dark City*. Although *Soylent Green* illustrates the devastating results of not emptiness but overpopulation, while highlighting a nostalgic view of Earth's past, it too critiques our destruction of the natural environment. *Dark City* moves us from space to a nostalgic view of a Noir City, but it is nature again that serves as John Murdoch's motivation — to return the city to a more natural state where life-giving water sustains human and nonhuman nature. And *Silent Running* foregrounds a tragic hero who yearns for Earth's pristine forests so much so that he sacrifices himself and his friends, so the last forest — floating in space — can be saved and preserved by a robot that looks like a double of WALL-E. *WALL-E* also highlights a solitary hero, but that hero, WALL-E, mingles both the singularity of a tragic hero with the community of a comic figure who saves Earth and its former inhabitants from an artificial life. All these films highlight both an individualized and collective nostalgia for an Earth in its most natural state.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The Axiom captain dreams of returning to Earth.



The Axiom captain finds hope in the lonely plant.



EVE and the captain watch EVE's recordings of Earth.

## Cultural artifacts and a first level of nostalgia: WALL-E's shift from tragic to comic eco-hero

WALL-E first introduces nostalgia when he collects cultural artifacts from mountains of debris during his workday. WALL-E is a robot built for clean up, collecting and compacting garbage to build a new cityscape made of rubbish bricks. He is alone, a tragic hero with only a cockroach as a companion. The vacant Buy N Large shops, banks, and train line they pass demonstrate a loneliness reinforced by the motionless piles of robots like himself along the road, dead “WALL-Es.” WALL-E is the sole survivor in this vacant city, so he uses their parts for repairs on himself.

But the city also provides a setting for collective and individual nostalgia for a more natural environment. The people are gone, leaving a silent city where one robot attempts to clean up after centuries of waste after remaining humans escape to a space station with a cruise ship atmosphere. An electronic billboard commercial WALL-E passes explains,

“Too much garbage in your place? There is plenty of space out in space! BNL StarLiners leaving each day. We'll clean up the mess while you're away.”

As if illustrating the commercial message, the camera pans down to show city streets where garbage brick buildings fill caverns between skyscrapers. Garbage is everywhere in the empty streets. Only one figure moves in this desolate scene, the square robot with “WALL-E” inscribed on his chest, who makes garbage bricks to construct these buildings every day. Other nonworking robots and large pieces of machinery bear the name, but WALL-E, the last working robot, turns this arid setting into a memory book, a place where treasures are buried under trash piles and collected in a dilapidated cooler and displayed in a private museum which doubles as a home.

In these scenes, WALL-E seems to serve as a tragic hero, which Joseph Meeker defines in “The Comic Mode: The Biology of Comedy” as

“a creature of suffering and greatness... [with] enormous ... capacity for creating and for enduring pain, for following a passion to its ultimate end, for employing the power of mind and spirit to rise above the contradictions of matter and circumstance, even though one is destroyed by them” (157).

As a tragic hero, WALL-E follows his directive each day, collecting and molding garbage into bricks while seeking to maintain the status quo, discovering artifacts to pay homage to Western culture.



Passengers prepare for the return to Earth.



Passengers prepare for the return to Earth.



Axiom returns to earth.



The captain and passengers walk unsteadily from the Axiom toward home.

Here he resembles Robert Neville (Charlton Heston) in *Omega Man* (1971) or the Neville character (Will Smith) in *I Am Legend* (2007), seeking to perpetuate his own cultural Mecca in a world gone savage. WALL-E first aligns with the Neville of *I Am Legend*, since he too has a sidekick pet — not a dog but a cockroach. Like the Neville of both films, however, WALL-E must barricade himself in his bunker each night, not to escape mutants but another product of nature — wind and dust storms. As a tragic hero, WALL-E is a pioneer, a “highly generalized, flexible, and adaptable creature[ ] capable of surviving despite the inhospitable nature of their environments” (Meeker 161). As Meeker asserts, “Pioneers must be aggressive, competitive, and tough” (161).

In these early scenes, WALL-E does seem to have survived because of a tough exterior. Following his directive, he recharges his solar power battery every morning and goes off to work, carrying his cooler on his rounds through the city, turning garbage into bricks and building taller and taller structures with each square. He stops only to collect more artifacts to add to his collections. The piles seem endless, but WALL-E is tireless, working in all conditions, stopping only to admire the treasures he collects, like the “spork” he sorts between his set of forks and spoons. And like Neville, WALL-E protects himself from blasts and dust storms in a secure bunker where he stores his collectibles by type and lights up the dark gloom with strings of bright holiday globes.

But this tragic hero seems to have internalized the messages of the artifacts he collects and evolved, in the process gaining characteristics of what Meeker calls a comic hero, who is “durable even though he may be weak, stupid, and undignified” (158). WALL-E has thus evolved from a machine to a more humanoid (and comic) android. Later, with his help, the other robots on the Axiom undergo the same transformation, and vacationing humans transform themselves from mindless consumers to eco-pioneers. Now, more a comic hero than a tragic one, WALL-E forms relationships with other robots and with humans that facilitate this renewal. According to Meeker,

“Comedy is a celebration, a ritual renewal of biological welfare as it persists in spite of any reasons there may be for feeling metaphysical despair” (159).

Instead of highlighting a tragic narrative, then, ultimately *WALL-E* shifts to a narrative that is embedded in the comic and communal, rather than tragic and individualized notions of species preservation found in the tragic evolutionary narrative of *The Odyssey* and of “early Darwinism” (Meeker, “The Comic Mode” 164). Those tragic evolutionary narratives support extermination and warfare rather than accommodation, the results on display in *WALL-E*’s opening shots.

According to Joseph Meeker, humans typically embrace a tragic evolutionary narrative, like that of *The Odyssey*. But, this position comes at a price and may cost humanity its existence. Meeker describes the problem:

“We demand that one species, our own, achieve unchallenged dominance where hundreds of species lived in complex equilibrium before our arrival” (164).



This attitude may not only lead to the destruction of other species but of humanity itself. Thus Meeker believes humanity has “a growing need to learn from the more stable comic heroes of nature, the animals” (164).



Passengers nearly stumble on their way to Earth.



EVE reawakens WALL-E by holding his hand.



Plant-life revealed in film's closing.



Humans have embraced a tragic evolutionary narrative in *WALL-E* that WALL-E the robot at first continues, following his directive. But ultimately the film changes direction, as do climax communities. The evolutionary narrative of *WALL-E* moves on to explore what might happen if humanity does learn from these more stable comic heroes, since, according to Meeker, “Evolution itself is a gigantic comic drama, not the bloody tragic spectacle imagined by the sentimental humanists of early Darwinism” (164). Meeker asserts:

"Nature is not 'red in tooth and claw' as the nineteenth-century English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson characterized it, for evolution does not proceed through battles fought among animals to see who is fit enough to survive and who is not. Rather, the evolutionary process is one of adaptation and accommodation, with the various species exploring opportunistically their environments in search of a means to maintain their existence. Like comedy, evolution is a matter of muddling through." (164)

For Meeker, successful evolution encourages communal action to ensure survival:

"Its ground rules for participants (including man) are those which also govern literary comedy: organisms must adapt themselves to their circumstances in every possible way, must studiously avoid all-or-nothing choices, must prefer any alternative to death, must accept and encourage maximum diversity, must accommodate themselves to the accidental limitations of birth and environment, and must always prefer love to war — though if warfare is inevitable, it should be prosecuted so as to humble the enemy without destroying him." (166)

WALL-E embraces this focus on humans' “adapting themselves to their circumstances in every possible way” while adding the element of nature. The script's trajectory constructs a narrative of environmental adaptation that provides a space for nature and a broader vision of humanity that includes the humanoid robots that teaches them a better way. To build this narrative, the film follows a three-act narrative grounded in nature and versions of nostalgia that evolve from the solitary to the communal:

- establishing Earth as an inhospitable setting for human and nonhuman nature.
- leaving Earth on an evolutionary journey.
- returning to Earth able to transform hell into a home.

## Romantic nostalgia: adapting the inhospitable

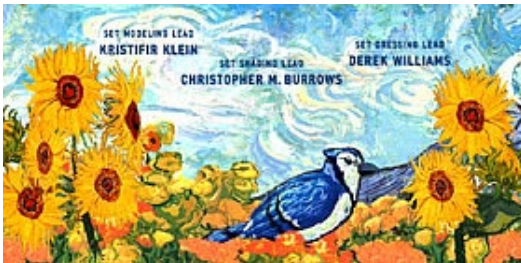
WALL-E's comic side emerges in his bunker when he turns on a VCR, and bits of *Hello Dolly* comes on the screen. Nostalgia for the working



Ending credits show Earth renewed.



Ending credits show Earth renewed.



Ending credits show Earth renewed.



EVE and WALL-E nurture a garden on Earth.

parts of Earth and the innocent Main Street of the musical *Hello Dolly* drive *WALL-E*, comic elements of community building because “comedy is the art of accommodation and reconciliation” (Meeker 168). Homages to Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and to Harold Lloyd reinforce this shift. WALL-E’s dance with a hubcap hat serves as an entry into a silent comic film plot with a romantic heroine at its center, no longer the figure in the video but EVE, a female love interest like those found in Buster Keaton plots, self-sufficient and strong, but ultimately desirable. WALL-E seems to embrace the indefatigable worker traits of Harold Lloyd characters and the romantic love for a seemingly unattainable woman of Charlie Chaplin’s Tramp films, all within the Buster Keaton storytelling model — a linear narrative in which WALL-E goes all the way out to the cruise ship and back to attain his girl, a strong female character like the love interest in *The General* (1927).

On one outing, however, WALL-E discovers a different kind of treasure inside a rusty refrigerator, a living growing plant that broaches another type of nostalgia, that for images of nature. This discovery shifts WALL-E from existing in a tragic individual mode to gaining a communal comic perspective in which he establishes interdependent relations with other robots, and human and nonhuman nature so that all species can survive (Meeker 168).

The introduction of EVE into Earth's desolate landscape provides a source for this interdependent relationship. EVE serves as a romantic female hero like those in Disney films and early silent comedies, but she also signifies a carefree freedom missing from the more tragic setup where WALL-E follows his directive so carefully. In one scene, for example, EVE flies above the waste with grace and speed. Accompanying music accentuates the sense of freedom her figure brings, and the dry landscape contrasts with her lively dance.

The entry of a trumpeted Louis Armstrong “La Vie en Rose” hints at WALL-E’s sudden feelings for EVE after viewing her dance. He follows her into a grocery store where he is rammed with shopping carts and the words, “When you kiss me,” come up in the song. WALL-E is fascinated. In the early scenes he shares with EVE on Earth, WALL-E seeks EVE’s attention as do Keaton, Chaplin, or Lloyd in all of their films, working to impress their female love interests. In Keaton’s films, as in *WALL-E*, the female protagonist always shares power and demonstrates her autonomy, just as EVE does from her early interactions with WALL-E until their return to Earth from the Axiom.

WALL-E attempts to impress EVE, just like Lloyd’s plucky “kid in the city” character in films like *Safety Last* (1923). Lloyd might send love letters and jewelry to a girl at home. WALL-E shows EVE his nostalgic artifacts, including the *Hello Dolly* video. They view the song and dance from the musical — “put on your Sunday clothes” — and WALL-E mimics the dance with his hubcap hat. EVE joins in the dance but is so strong she nearly destroys WALL-E and his home when she emulates him. WALL-E must even replace an eye with one of the extras he has stored. She is intrigued by the Zippo lighter and the “And that is love” line from “Only a Moment.” WALL-E wants to hold her hand and is so infatuated that the lighter reflects the love in his eyes as he reaches for her. Eve pulls away but sees the handholding in the movie and laughs as



WALL-E's plant roots into what looks like a Tree of Life.

WALL-E searches for something else. It is the plant. He brings it out in the shoe, but when she sees it, she opens up her abdomen, places the plant inside, and shuts down, floating silently. WALL-E has awakened and inspired EVE just as Earth's cultural artifacts had awakened him. Now EVE's directive becomes the priority.

## Eco-memory and nostalgia: an evolutionary journey

When images of nature take precedence over romance, WALL-E is at first unprepared to accept the loss of love it might require. WALL-E is devastated and keeps calling EVE's name after her own directive shuts her down. He attempts to revive her in the sun. He cares for her during a storm, putting umbrellas over her and protecting her from hail. He tries jumper cables and floats her around with him in a tire boat. He even sits with her on a bench to watch a sunset — like the iconic moment from *Manhattan* (1979). It is an absurd scene with all the garbage surrounding them. WALL-E plays pong with her, but she does not awaken. He goes off to work the next morning with his cooler, leaving EVE behind and builds his termite hill with no joy, lighting the Zippo as a reminder.

When EVE's space probe returns, and its arm retrieves her, WALL-E races back and yells her name. He feels so connected with EVE, he cannot part with her and grabs onto the ship's ladder as the ship takes off and plows through old satellites and debris into a quiet and clean space. WALL-E watches EVE through a porthole as he passes the moon where the lunar landing capsule and flag remain, along with a sign for an outlet mall. He even seems to touch the stars. Then a brightly lit and massive ship appears from behind cosmic clouds, and the probe enters the Axiom, the cruise ship on display in the ads.

It seems only robots inhabit this cruise ship until an obese human figure floats by on a chaise lounge. Others follow. They all stare into video screens and call for drinks and food. This cruise station looks similar to the Earth described in *Silent Running*, one large temperature-regulated mall. Now the paradise of the artificial world depicted in the ads on Earth becomes a nightmare.

In this cruise ship hell, WALL-E becomes the force of nostalgia, reminding humans and other robots of the value of human relations like those in *Hello Dolly* and ultimately of nonhuman nature. When a human falls out of his chair, WALL-E helps him back up and introduces himself, so the human — John — talks back, establishing a relation missing from the isolated video lives humans share. Humans have become such isolated consumers that when a robotic voice tells the humans that "blue is the new red," all the humans change their costume

colors in lock step. But again, WALL-E shatters the established order when he opens up a woman's chair controls and turns off her video feed. He introduces himself, and she too talks back. Her name is Mary. Two humans now have interacted with WALL-E and changed their pattern of behavior.

WALL-E has already established a relationship with EVE and stays with her as she is ushered to the captain to share her plant discovery. After 700 years, EVE, Extraterrestrial Vegetative Extractor, has returned positive for plant life, and "Operation Re-Colonize" can begin. With life returning to the home planet, Axiom will navigate the people back to Earth, the manual explains. Video images of Forthright, the CEO from BNL, explain that there will be slight bone loss to contend with after a return to Earth's gravity.

Autopilot, the captain's robotic co-pilot, has a different plan and tells the captain, "We cannot go home." After some coaxing from the captain, Auto shows another message from Forthright who reveals that Operation Cleanup has failed and toxicity levels are too high to sustain life on Earth. "It will be easier to remain in space," the CEO states. "Do not return to Earth." The plot is now revealed. The Earth, according to Forthright, is past saving and any contrary proof must be destroyed in order for the Axiom to remain in its present place. Autopilot is merely following his directive, to abandon any attempts to return to Earth.

## Eco-memory and nostalgia: culture and nature merge to make earth a home

The dirt WALL-E leaves in the captain's hand helps ignite the captain's urge to go home. He is intrigued by the dirt in his hand and asks the computer to analyze it. When the computer tells him it is soil — Earth, another form of nostalgia is established for the captain, nostalgia for images of nature. As the captain asks the computer to define Earth, images of green fields and blue skies come on the screen, just as they do in the opening of *Soylent Green*. Images from D.W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) show a lone farmer sowing seeds, while foregrounding the connection between humans and nature and the possibilities that remain after a corporation has taken control of agricultural industries. The collective eco-memories on display there become the captain's individual nostalgic yearnings, all because WALL-E found a plant and brought soil to Axiom's sterile world.

When EVE brings the captain the plant, the captain is thrilled that they can go home. He wants to see what Earth now looks like and turns on a recorded feed of her visit to Earth. It does not look like the computer images. "Where's the blue sky? Where's the grass" he asks, waxing nostalgically. The computer images, however, also ignite a spark in him to return the Earth to its earlier more natural state.

WALL-E's tape of *Hello Dolly* cements the captain's decision. He knows they must go back. He now realizes the film's characters are dancing, so they must return to Earth and nurture it. Since the plant represents the Earth, he must nurture it as well. He waters the plant — you "just needed someone to look after you, that's all. We have to go back!" Now he knows that Earth too needs someone to look after it. WALL-E has

awakened the humans and androids from their passive existence, so they are drawn to one another and to the Earth they left behind.

Although Autopilot attempts to stop the captain, WALL-E, and EVE from returning to Earth, WALL-E fosters relations with malfunctioning misfit robots, EVE, the captain, and at least two humans and facilitates their return to Earth. Once the rest of the humans awake from their video-driven lives, they too form interdependent relationships and save one another from collisions. EVE uses a barrier to stop chairs from sliding into rows of humans along a wall. Mary and John save a group of children from crashing into the barrier. Autopilot pushes another button to close the process, and WALL-E holds up the mechanism in which they must place the plant. The captain must switch the Axiom to manual power, so he stands up and waddles over to Auto, turning him off after a struggle. Now the captain has control, navigating the ship manually. He turns the wheel back to its normal position and the Axiom is now level, so humans and androids are safe. The others stand up and pass the plant to EVE and the Operation Re-Colonize mechanism. It lifts up off WALL-E and a course is set for Earth. WALL-E is nearly crushed, but humans now care about one another and desire to go home.

The return to Earth marks the fruition of the evolutionary journey in *WALL-E*. Eve has connected so completely with WALL-E that, once back on Earth, she rushes him to his bunker to repair him, using the parts he had so carefully stored there. After she rebuilds and reenergizes him, he reverts back to a robotic existence, even crushing some of his artifacts to fulfill his directive. Yet even though he does not know EVE, she persists, even after the *Hello Dolly* music does not awaken WALL-E's persona. When she follows him out to a garbage pile, touches his hand, and kisses him, however, WALL-E awakens and responds to her, saying her name. They hold hands just like the figures in *Hello Dolly*, emulating the nostalgic image on display.

The captain, on the other hand, leads the humans out of the ship to reclaim a different nostalgic memory, that of images of nature from his computer screen and in the plant he carries so carefully with him to Earth. With a crowd of children around him, the captain places the plant in soil — a first act of regeneration — and calls it *farming*. The camera pans out to reveal other vegetation as it crosses Earth and moves out to space. The film continues into the credits, highlighting the positive consequences of interdependent relations between human and nonhuman nature. The captain and multiple children and adults farm and fish, building an interconnected civilization, while EVE, WALL-E and the misfit robots build a family.

WALL-E and EVE's family seems to serve as sustenance for the plant growing beneath them. Its roots deepen, still growing from the **boot** [EXPLAIN], and the plant becomes an enormous tree, showing the rejuvenation of nature and the growth of an effective relationship between humans and the natural world. Because of the nostalgia for human artifacts and culture, an eco-memory drives the captain of a cruise ship to return to Earth, leaving the artificial world of the Axiom behind. The rolling end credits reveal a new fertile world emerging from the garbage humans left behind, all made possible because a robot connected with humanity and revived humans' and robots' will to



remember. It is a happy heterosexual ending. The new pioneers, both human and android, ally to attempt to recover the planet. In this new Eden made possible because of WALL-E and his EVE, even dust storms are eradicated and a nostalgic image of nature begins to thrive.

[Go to Works cited and filmography](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Works cited

Allen, Charlotte. "WALL-E Doesn't Say Anything." *Los Angeles Times*. July 13, 2008.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-op-allen13-2008jul13,0,6297183.story>.

Denby, David. "Past Shock: *The Dark Knight* and *WALL-E*." *The New Yorker*. 7/21/08.

[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2008/07/21/080721crci\\_cinema\\_denby](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2008/07/21/080721crci_cinema_denby)

Gabler, Neal. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

"IGN: The Pixar Philosophy." *Movies.IGN.Com*. August 2, 2008.

<http://movies.ign.com/articles/890/890717p1.html>.

Meeker, Joseph W. "The Comic Mode." *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996. 155-169.

Mondello, Bob. "WALL-E: Speaking Volumes with Stillness and Stars." *NPR.org*. June 27, 2008.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91894500>.

Paik, Karen. *To Infinity and Beyond: The Story of Pixar Animation Studios*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007.

Pinheiro, Ethel and Duarte, Cristiane Rose. "Panem et circenses at Largo da Carioca, Brazil: The Urban Diversity Focused on People-Environment Interactions." *Anthropology Matters Journal* 6.1 (2004). Accessed November 19, 2006

[www.anthropologymatters.com](http://www.anthropologymatters.com).

Scott, A. O. "WALL-E." *The New York Times*. June 27, 2008.

<http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/06/27/movies/27wall.html>.

Stewart, Kathleen. "Nostalgia — a Polemic." *Cultural Anthropology*. 3.3 (August 1988): 227-241.

Travers, Peter. "WALL-E." *Rolling Stone*. July 10, 2008. "Wall-E

Review." *Movieguide.org*. July 14 2008.

<http://www.movieguide.org/index.php?s=reviews&ids=7804>

Wells, Paul. *Animation and America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Zacharek, Stephanie. "WALL-E." *Salon.com*. June 27, 2008.

## Filmography

*A Bug's Life*. Dir. John Lasseter and Andrew Stanton. Disney/Pixar, 1998.

*Chicken Little*. Dir. Mark Dindal. Disney, 2005.

*A Corner in Wheat*. Dir. D. W. Griffith. Perfs. Frank Powell, Grace Henderson. Biograph, 1909.

*Dark City*. Dir. Alex Proyas. Perfs. Rufus Sewell, William Hurt, Kiefer Sutherland. Jennifer Connelly. New Line Cinema, 1998.

*Finding Nemo*. Dir. Andrew Stanton. Disney/Pixar, 2003.

*The General*. Dirs. Clyde Buckman and Buster Keaton. Perf. Marion Mack, Buster Keaton. United Artists, 1927.

*Hello Dolly*. Dir. Gene Kelly. Perfs. Barbara Streisand, Walter Matthau. 20th Century Fox, 1969.

*Home on the Range*. Dirs. Will Finn and John Sanford. Disney, 2004.

*I am Legend*. Dir. Francis Lawrence. Perf. Will Smith. Warner Brothers, 2007.

*An Inconvenient Truth*. Dir. Davis Guggenheim. Perf. Al Gore. Paramount, 2006.

*Manhattan*. Dir. Woody Allen. Perfs. Woody Allen, Diane Keaton. United Artists, 1979.

*The Omega Man*. Dir. Boris Sagel. Perf. Charlton Heston. Warner Brothers, 1971.

*Powers of Ten*. Dir. Charles and Ray Eames. Perf. Phil Morrison. International Business Machines, 1977.

*Safety Last!* Dir. Fred C. Newmeyer. Perfs. Harold Lloyd and Mildred Davis, Pathe Exchange, 1923.

*Silent Running*. Dir. Douglas Trumbull. Perf. Bruce Dern. Universal Pictures, 1972.

*Soylent Green*. Dir. Richard Fleischer. Perfs. Charlton Heston, Edward G. Robinson. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1973.

*WALL-E*. Dir. Andrew Stanton. Perfs. Ben Burtt, Elyssa Knight. Pixar/Disney, 2008.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*: the death of America's hero

by [Robert Alpert](#)



Clint Eastwood's film life begins with the innocent look of cowboy Rowdy Yates from TV's *Rawhide*.

Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* is a meditation on time, its elegiac tone reflecting upon U.S. mythology and Eastwood's film life. The movie expresses Eastwood's pained sense of loss everywhere around him, to which he has himself contributed. It is appropriate that Eastwood's craggy, low key voice sings over of the end credits, mourning the temporary comfort of the *Gran Torino* which represented, in Eastwood's view, the "best" of the United States but a United States which could not prevent the loneliness inevitably suffered by its own heroes. It is telling that the U.S. flag, which is so often associated with Eastwood's Walter Kowalski, prominently flying from his porch and reflected behind him as he constantly sits on that porch, is last associated with him as an emblem sewn into his coffin.



The Italian director Sergio Leone was the first to dramatize Eastwood as the macho hero, the Man with No Name, in *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *For a Few Dollars More* (1965).



As Sergio Leone stylized Eastwood, he provided the U.S. Civil War background and introduced death to his image, in this case literally a cemetery that concluded *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966).



In 1971 Don Siegel made the first of five *Dirty Harry* movies, turning the Western hero into an urban hero. Dirty Harry throughout these movies wields a 44 Magnum, an undisguised phallic symbol of U.S. male prowess.



Eastwood directed himself in *Sudden Impact* (1983) playing Dirty Harry, the invincible loner with his enhanced Magnum.



The plot of *Gran Torino* is reminiscent of many of Eastwood's movies. The most obvious parallel is to *Unforgiven*. Both movies begin with the death of the Eastwood character's wife and end with a confrontation with evil of overwhelming odds. Bill Munny's quiet remark in the *Unforgiven* to The Schofield Kid about the effect of killing finds its parallel in *Gran Torino* in Eastwood's confession of how killing the enemy in the Korean War has never left him. The hero worship of Walter by his neighbors reminds us of Dirty Harry, and that Walter brandishes his pistol, first imaginary and then real, is surely intended to refer to Dirty Harry's 44 Magnum. The scene in which Eastwood shaves and dons a hand-tailored suit is reminiscent of the many, fetish-like scenes in which the invincible Man with No Name prepares for his final showdown, though in *Gran Torino* Walter's suit is the one in which he will be buried.

Eastwood often copied his mentor Sergio Leone, creating allegorical, Western tales of clear good and evil, such as *High Plains Drifter* in 1973.



He repeated himself, including the white horse, in *Pale Rider* (1985).



The Man with No Name reached its apotheosis in William Munny in the Oscar-winning *Unforgiven* (1992).



But always there was a too fable-like quality to Eastwood's tales, as in the Wild West Show of *Bronco Billy* (1980), in which the patients of a mental institution rescue the ex-shoe salesman's dream by creating a tent of U.S. flags.

No other actor today is so associated with a history of film icons, the early ones created not by Eastwood but by his mentors, Don Siegel in the case of *Dirty Harry* and Sergio Leone in the case of the Man with No Name. Eastwood, as the director, brings to Eastwood, the actor, a self-consciousness of the distance between himself as film icon and as an actor portraying that icon. Don Siegel depicted Eastwood as a San Francisco cop who voiced the frustrations of many in such lines as "Do I feel lucky? Well do ya, punk?" but Eastwood, the actor, now 78 years old, self-consciously mouths the line "Ever notice how you come across somebody you shouldn't have messed with? That's me." *Gran Torino* is an acknowledgement that these icons are part of a mythology which has self-destructed, disappeared in the same way that the U.S. mythic frontier did. In that respect *Gran Torino* mourns a past both historic and imaginary.



There is an unease, too, even in *Unforgiven*, where a woman's face is disfigured and the resulting violence is over-the-top.



On a hill barren but for a solitary tree, William Munny tells the Schofield Kid, "It's a hell of a thing, killin' a man. Take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have."



Eastwood plays a song-writing, guitar-playing, singing cowboy, Red Stoval, in *Honkytonk Man* (1982). But like Walter Kowalski, he coughs up blood and forfeits at the Grand Ole Opry ...



...tryout, his one moment of possibility and then dies of tuberculosis, even as he hurriedly records song after song in order to make his mark in the world.





Eastwood, as romantic hero Robert Kincaid, momentarily rescues Francesca Johnson (Meryl Streep) in *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995), but she is ultimately trapped by her family.



The family devours one of its own in *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), and Eastwood is again left alone.



The heroic, photographic moment in *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) is, in fact, a reenactment of the moment.

Eastwood has always been understood as an actor who embodies what is stereotypically macho – little emotion and few words, action-oriented and professional. The title of the movie, *Gran Torino*, tells us all. It was an ordinary car but viewed as a "muscle car" for men. That Eastwood as Walter Kowalski installed the steering wheel column in his own Gran Torino conveys the identity between the man and his car. That Walter pointedly leaves in his will the Gran Torino to Thao Lor (Bee Vang), his surrogate son, rather than to his granddaughter Ashley (Drea Walker), represents the passage of the rite of American masculinity to the next generation of males. Indeed, the movie's story shows the progressive development of Thao into his assumption of that role - from our first view of him washing dishes to his unsuccessful initiation into the gang by his failed theft of Walter's Gran Torino to his washing of the car during his week of redemptive tasks to Walter's offer to allow him to drive the car for his first date (dinner and a movie!) with Youa (Choua Kue). Eastwood seems to express a continued belief in the macho male. His movie seemingly shows the development of Thao from "pussy" kid – Walter's repeated epithet for Thao - to his being "manned up" – so that he can become a construction worker. From that perspective it is appropriate that in this fairy tale Walter's other nickname for Thao is "toad."





The designated heroes are themselves forced to reenact again and again that reenacted moment – once in a stadium filled with spectators to the tune of Bronco Billy's Wild West Show.



Eastwood in *Gran Torino* makes us believe, or want to believe, that Walter Kowalski, even at the age of 78, remains our U.S. hero, complete with flag and gun. "Get off my lawn," he tells the mixed-race gang, evoking the Western mythology to which Eastwood has himself contributed.



Walter explains to his surrogate son,

Yet for all the film's apparent reiteration of this mythology, Eastwood, the director, calls into question its basis in reality and value. No scene better illustrates Eastwood's understanding of the artifice and falseness of his film image than the lengthy, humorous scene in which Walter explains to Thao how he should speak with his barber buddy Martin (John Lynch). The irony of the scene is that Thao succeeds in bettering both – and thereby unmanning them – by his story of his sore ass caused by his too many construction buddies (a joke at Walter's expense on the eroticism of male bonding) and his later suckering of Tim Kennedy (William Hill), the construction foreman, into hiring him through his made up story of his non-existent car. Indeed, while Walter helps Thao find a job in construction, Thao seeks only to match what Walter's son has achieved, namely a job in sales, a job which surely will result in economic benefit but also an uprooting from the neighborhood in the same way that Walter's son's success benefited him and his family but estranged son from father. Walter judges his son harshly for selling foreign cars and never buying American. It is surely ironic, though, that the mixed-race gang, which is comprised of the children of the newest generation of immigrants, pointedly drives a foreign car. Walter passes on the Gran Torino to his adopted son, also of that generation, but Eastwood leaves us with no doubt that salvation is not to be found in the Gran Torino, the end credits playing over a highway filled with one foreign car after the next going down the highway.

Eastwood, through his doubling of events and characters, creates a sense of both inevitability and circularity to what we watch. The first scene at Walter's home begins with Walter commenting that the large crowd came not to mourn his wife's death but rather for the food he has set out, and it ends with the stream of guests leaving his home. The camera pans over to the house next door where the guests are streaming in with their food offerings to celebrate the birth of a new baby. These are the new immigrants who have come to replace the white Europeans who have fled the neighborhood, leaving behind only Walter and a few others of his generation who congregate at the local bar. The comic irony is that Walter's double is Thao's grandmother, who also sits on her porch and who can out spit him. Both are simply old, as Walter later observes in leaving his dog Daisy with her. While Eastwood shows Walter pummeling one of the gang members and threatening to wreak more violence if the gang does not leave Thao alone, he follows that scene with Walter out of breath as he enters his own home so that we fear for his safety. The film enables Walter to relive his life through his new family, but the film ends both unexpectedly and unpleasantly. History repeats itself, and Walter's country does not improve itself.

Eastwood sympathizes more with these newest immigrants, symbolized by the difference in the two scenes of confession – one to the baby-faced priest, Father Janovich (Christopher Corley), and the other to Thao in which Walter acknowledges killing, unordered, a kid Thao's age who simply wanted to live. Nevertheless, Eastwood understands that these immigrants will wind up in the same place as the prior generation. He self-consciously brackets his story through the use of untrained actors as well as through the clear, crisp lighting which encapsulates the idea of a working class neighborhood, complete with separate backyards and porches. Walter is himself perfectly framed on his porch, dog next to him, a U.S. flag waving in the wind, and Gran Torino in the driveway. This is a fable, an enactment of the American dream, Eastwood tells us. Thao helps Walter carry the freezer up the basement stairs, a symbol of the developing emotional connection between Walter and Thao, but Eastwood ends the scene with Thao's family buying the freezer for twenty-five dollars. They, too, will acquire the material goods, a freezer in this instance, and later, if successful, tools and a car, which Walter's sons, the inheritors of the American dream, already possess in abundance.

Thao, the tools he has collected over a lifetime.



Walter and his friend Martin later explain to Thao the male way of speaking.



Ironically Walter Kowalski's birthday gift from his son and daughter-in-law is itself a tool to help him reach things no longer within his reach.



Walter reacts poorly to the suggestion that he sell his home and enter a retirement community.

Thus, there is a circularity to Eastwood's film. We first visit Walter's basement at the funeral luncheon when his grandchildren wide-eyed and excitedly open his trunk and spy his medal; and we later revisit the basement when Walter opens that same trunk to show that same medal to Thao, only to tell of the horrors that it has inflicted on Walter's entire life. There is the myth of heroism embodied in a Silver Star and then there is the reality of that medal. Eastwood spins his tale so as to tell us that this is what a 50s neighborhood in Detroit looked like when he raised his sons and this is what it still looks like today but with a new generation of U.S. immigrants. It is funny and sad, sweet and bitter, that Walter rises to heroism by declaring to the Hmong gang: "Stay off my lawn", a variation on the Westerner's threat of the 50s to "stay off my land." These new immigrants, like Walter, believe in the American myth of Bronco Billy, the individual who can be whomever he wants, needs only a small plot of land and a family, and which in the 50s took the form of separate neighborhoods of single family homes. In contrast to the father of Thao and Sue, Walter is American old school and hence is revered as a hero by these newest immigrants. The American pragmatist, he fixes things as well as finishes things. He spends a lifetime accumulating the tools in his garage, material goods, naming them and knowing how they work and in the film's most awkward moment fixes the broken leg on the washing machine in the Lor's basement. The members of the younger generation in the meantime flirt with one another nearby, uncomprehending of the icon before them and, ironically enough, ignorant of its meaning for them.

Eastwood mocks Walter's image of himself, including his professionalism, and as such his own film image. While Walter reacts violently to his son's suggestion of a home in a retirement community, Eastwood later shows Walter sitting alone in the dark, watching baseball on his television set, and helplessly pulling out his gun the night the gang attacks his neighbors. Walter chastises Father Janovich for his bitter and sweet speech but what does he substitute? He has only the bitterness of killing for his country, for which he was awarded a medal and now bleeds internally, and the sweetness – Walter's term – of the *Gran Torino*, a material object which disappears during the end credits. The rage he feels for receiving that medal finds its most explicit, albeit misplaced, outlet in his smashing of his kitchen cabinets and the bloodying of his hands. Revenge is its own end, resolving nothing, Eastwood tells us. In retrospect, recalling Walter's coughing at his wife's funeral, we realize that Walter was already dying. There is no glory in dying; rather, each of us dies alone, regardless of how we die, Eastwood also tells us.

There is despair at the center of Eastwood's recent films. Characters inevitably sit alone in mostly dark space, conjuring up the loneliness of a Hopper painting. In *Gran Torino* Walter sits alone in his poorly lit kitchen thinking about what he will do to exact revenge and then finds peace only in his acceptance of dying, a decision which represents a reversal of what we anticipate, namely a violent reprisal on the gang for the violence it had exacted on the Lor family. It isn't fair, says Father Janovich, but it never is, Eastwood responds. It is the same observation which Bill Munny made to The Schofield Kid. Thus, we expect the myth to play out and prevail, but instead Eastwood brings us down to the reality of an individual alone and mortal. Instead of the myth which is beyond time, Eastwood gives us only time which washes over all of us, including him, as well as our possessions, including the *Gran Torino*. Eastwood has himself come full circle in acknowledging the failure of his own mythology.



In the ownership of his home, Walter has achieved the American dream. He sits alone all day on his porch, drinking beer.



Until the very end Walter continues to sit alone, watching TV and “at peace” with his decision to die – “all he’s got and all he’s ever gonna have.”

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Interpreting revolution: *Che: Part I and Part II*

by [Victor Wallis](#)



*Che as he was in 1950, riding across Argentina.*

Seeing *Che* (parts one and two, dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2008) and then reading about it prompts reflections on the larger political project that inspired its protagonist. One wonders to what extent the scope and thrust of that project – socialist revolution in Cuba and beyond – can be conveyed to audiences of a new generation through a focus on that particular individual.

Not surprisingly, the reviews of *Che* are politically predictable. Commentators who parrot the dismissive labeling of Cuba's revolutionary regime as a totalitarian dictatorship are scornful of the film – their hostility only magnified by its length. They cannot get beyond noting – not mentioned in the film – that Guevara ordered executions of Batista henchmen in the aftermath of the 1959 victory. Any notion of situating those decisions in relation to the prior regime's conduct – and the intense mass repudiation it aroused – would no doubt be viewed by them as mere apologetics. They reject the revolution on principle (just as U.S. officialdom after 1979 denounced the Nicaraguan revolution even though it abolished the death penalty), and no film that gives a respectful treatment to one of its leaders can be expected to change their minds.

What gives Che Guevara an appeal that eludes such gatekeepers is his unique trajectory from the perils of guerrilla warfare to a position of power and renown, and then back again to clandestinity, danger, and eventual capture and assassination. The two phases of this trajectory – shown in Parts I and II of the present film – are inseparable in defining who Che was. Revolutionary leaders in power, no matter how faithful to the ideals that inspired them, are always vulnerable to the charge that they value their position of authority more than they do their original commitment to social justice. Che's withdrawal from state functions was the most conclusive proof that no such accusation could be leveled at him. It was at the same time a tribute to the larger vision that enabled him to think that way.



*The Motorcycle Diaries, a dramatization of Che's formative voyage through the length of South America.*





Benicio del Toro as Che in Soderbergh film



Part Two of film is much grimmer.

Che's legacy thus beams an aura of integrity that reaches beyond those who share his politics or who know much about his life. However much his iconic status may have been degraded by commodification (the ubiquitous T-shirts), the aura underlying it is one that will continue to perturb defenders of privilege. Among the messages it conveys is that no amount of economic, political, or military might can withstand the moral force of a mobilized population. Corollary to this, and implicit in Che's practical optimism, is the idea that while corrupt regimes have much to hide, their revolutionary challengers thrive on bringing every dilemma and every social antagonism to the surface.



The ubiquitous Che t-shirt

The task, therefore, for anyone wanting to build on Che's example – a goal embraced by this film's producers[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) – is not to feed into a legend of heroism but rather to develop an awareness of both the objective hurdles and the positive human qualities that are involved in dismantling structures of oppression. This is a tall order, certainly a challenge to any attempt at reenactment. As predictable as the hostility to *Che* shown by commercial taste-makers are the reservations, qualifications, and overall ambivalence expressed about the film by so many of those who on political grounds might have been expected to welcome it.

Much of such criticism emanates from a misplaced literal-mindedness. One reviewer, for instance, laments the fact that the film's Fidel (Demián Bichir), although a skilled actor, lacks Castro's physical stature and charisma. Such details do not seem to bother those who care about the film's basic subject-matter, which does not end with the personal traits of even its main protagonist. In a post-screening appearance in Cambridge, Mass., producer and lead actor Benicio del Toro was asked about the film's reception in Cuba. Remarking on the Cubans' positive response, he told of an Afro-Cuban veteran of the revolution present at the Havana screening who was portrayed in the film by an actor with blond hair and blue eyes. Asked whether this bothered him, the veteran replied that it was of no importance in terms of the film's authenticity.



Che and Fidel in real life.



1957 photo of revolutionary Cuban forces — physician Che at second left



1961 postrevolutionary Cuba, Che reading newspaper *La Nación*

Of course, any number of real omissions can be found. This is not a biography of Che (his early development was portrayed in *The Motorcycle Diaries*), nor does it offer more than the briefest glimpse of his private life. As for his role (between 1959 and 1965) in Cuba's revolutionary government, this is represented almost exclusively in the form of flash-forwards from the pre-1959 guerrilla struggle (Part I of the film) to scenes from when he spoke at the UN General Assembly in 1964. There is thus no attempt to encompass his significant (and controversial) impact on the economic transformation of Cuba, or his role in Cuba's internal struggles of that period. What the UN scenes (including interviews and small talk) offer is a sense, on the one hand, of Guevara's intellectual agility and his understanding of imperialism and, on the other, of his detached and ironic attitude toward the trappings of power. These flash-forwards, then, serve to dramatize the outcome of the victorious struggle of Part I, and thereby also to frame the tragic unfolding of Che's subsequent Bolivian venture (1966-67), which is the theme of Part II.



Che's 1964 visit to UN in photo taken at the time



Restaged photo with Benicio del Toro acting Che's visit to UN



Just as the film as a whole is not a “life” of Che, so also the account in Part I, based as it is on his *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*,<sup>[2]</sup> does not purport to be a full history of how the revolution came to power. It mentions only in passing the urban middle-class opposition to the Batista regime, whose importance in the whole process we do not need to debate here. The reason the revolutionaries based in the countryside prevailed is that it was they who routed Batista’s armed forces, having successfully mobilized the Cuban peasantry – a large portion of which was made up of seasonally unemployed cane-cutters on the sugar plantations.<sup>[3]</sup> The focus of Che’s narrative, and hence of the film, is on understanding how this mobilization was carried out.

The film’s depiction of this process did not strike me – contrary to the assertions of certain hostile reviewers – as in any way hagiographic. True, we see Che at one time or another applying his medical expertise, encouraging a peasant recruit to become literate, and coughing from his asthma. But the film’s emphasis is less on his uniqueness than on the egalitarian camaraderie that prevailed among the guerrilla fighters. More revealing in a political sense are the guerrillas’ interactions with the local population. Here Guevara’s revolutionary implacability is fully reflected. While the guerrilla band is open and welcoming to those desiring to join the struggle, and is willing to allow them a probationary period after which they are free to leave, it follows Che’s lead in showing no mercy to those who inform on the group or whose misconduct risks disgracing the revolution in the eyes of the people.

The film does encourage reflection on such matters, showing discussions of them within the guerrilla band. There is no way to pretend that decisions made in such a context are necessarily the right ones; a degree of guesswork is sometimes unavoidable. What we come to see, however, is that the moral dimension of those battlefield choices is fully recognized. A remarkable trait of Che’s writings is the candor with which he speaks of the day-to-day routines of guerrilla struggle, in which what might otherwise be passed off as casual lapses of vigilance can suddenly take on life-and-death proportions. The challenge is sometimes as much to the patience of the participants as it is to their courage. It would be difficult to convey this on film without some slow-moving passages.

Where in Part I the guerrillas’ forest routine is offset by repeated reminders of eventual success, in Part II (based on Guevara’s *Bolivian Diary*)<sup>[4]</sup> its heaviness is unrelieved. Interestingly, the experience of this latter part is what the filmmakers started out from. Director Steven Soderbergh at first thought of just casting occasional backward glances from the Bolivian campaign to Che’s earlier career. Only later did those planned recollections expand to comprise the entirety of Part I.<sup>[5]</sup> In any case, it is clear that whereas for the film’s viewers Che’s triumph frames his subsequent defeat, the opposite dynamic was at work in the film’s gestation. Either way, though, the interplay of the two components is ever-present.<sup>[6]</sup> There is an inescapable irony in watching how a man who has held U.S. imperialism up for condemnation before the entire world can be brought back to a situation in which his fate and that of his movement are placed in the hands of a taciturn Bolivian peasant whom he has unsuccessfully cajoled with his medical services. His very persistence, in that context, appears all the more remarkable.

The only cinematic counterpoint in Part II to the guerrilla campaign is the arousal of the Bolivian military government and its U.S. backers. More chilling, however, than their predictable counterinsurgency plotting is the diffidence of the rural population. The guerrilla band, cut off from any external supply lines, was without recourse. Its presence in such hostile surroundings reflected the





Famous photo by Freddy Alborta of Che's corpse surrounded by Bolivian military. Leandro Katz made a documentary about the photo and Alborta, [El día que me quieras](#). (Click link to see [Jump Cut](#) essay by John Hess on film).

disconnect between a global analysis of the empire's vulnerability and the clashing reality of a people who – as also experienced by Che the previous year in the Congo, albeit for different reasons[7]– had not yet developed a capacity to challenge the empire's oppression. The consequent hopelessness of the guerrilla campaign is so insistently impressed upon us that it comes as a surprise when Che, captured and doomed, is shown a fleeting expression of warmth by a young soldier assigned to guard him.

And yet, however incongruous the global analysis might have appeared in such a desolate setting, the ultimate impact of the Che's guerrilla campaigns has played out over a bigger canvas. His abortive mission in the Congo proved nonetheless to be an early step in a long-term Cuban involvement in Africa, one of whose fruits was a major military victory (in Angola) over the South African apartheid regime – a decisive moment in apartheid's collapse.[8] The impact in Latin America would be more diffuse. The Bolivian defeat ended any thought of an external jump-start to revolution, but guerrilla warfare – indigenously based – would continue to spark popular movements with notable impact especially in Nicaragua and later (1994) in Chiapas.



Che in Congo



Che with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir

Broader than Che's strategic legacy, however, is his moral legacy, expressed in the depth of his personal commitment and also in his internationalism. These traits have attained a resonance in Cuban society which is not even noticed by those who see in that country only its material challenges and its harsh response to subversion. Cuba projects an ethic of service which would be unimaginable on such a scale in a capitalist society, and it has indeed begun to show results at a global level which may prove – in our new age of military robotics – to be a more effective anti-imperialist strategy than was Che's admonition (1967)[9] to "create two, three, many Vietnams." Cuba's global presence now takes primarily the form of doctors, teachers, and disaster-relief teams. It has for years provided hurricane-relief all over the Caribbean; its earthquake-relief has extended as far as Pakistan, where its workers stood out in their readiness to share the hardships of those they were helping.[10] Supporting the new wave of elected revolutionary regimes in Latin America (beginning with Venezuela and Bolivia), thousands of Cuban health workers are providing service in poor communities. And, in an astonishing gesture of reconciliation, Cuban doctors performed a cataract operation, forty years later, on the Bolivian soldier who had carried out the execution order against Che Guevara.[11]

No better monument could be imagined to this warrior and doctor. The effectiveness of "*Che* the film," like that of any cinematic representation of political struggle, will ultimately depend on how it can be used in raising awareness. Part of this job will depend on the rest of us. The contribution of the



film itself – for which Del Toro, Soderbergh, and their team deserve great credit – is to have provided context for a full appreciation of Che's integrity.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### Notes

1. See Benicio del Toro, “The Impossible Dream” (interview), *Sight & Sound*, January 2009. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. Trans. Victoria Ortiz (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
3. See Maurice Zeitlin, *Revolutionary Politics and the Cuban Working Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).
4. Ed. Robert Scheer (New York: Bantam Books, 1968).
5. “The Impossible Dream,” p. 37.
6. J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice* makes a similar point in one of the more perceptive reviews I have seen (<http://www.villagevoice.com/content/printVersion/773071>).
7. See Ernesto “Che” Guevara, *The African Dream: The Diaries of the Revolutionary War in the Congo*, trans. Patrick Camiller (New York: Grove Press, 2000).
8. For background, see Richard Gott, Introduction to Guevara, *The African Dream*; on the outcome, Fidel Castro, “Cuba and the End of Apartheid,” *Socialism and Democracy*, no. 20 (Summer 1996).
9. See Michael Löwy, *The Marxism of Che Guevara*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 102. On military robotics, see P.W. Singer, *Wired for War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).
10. Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, “Cuban Doctors in Pakistan: Why Cuba Still Inspires,” *Monthly Review*, November 2006. On Cuba today more generally, see *Monthly Review*, January 2009, special issue: *Cuba, 1959-2009: A Half-Century of Socialism*.
11. “Cuban doctors help Che Guevara’s killer,” *Brisbane Times*, September 30, 2007, <http://news.brisbanetimes.com.au/world/cuban-doctors-help-che-guevaras-killer-20070930-11s1.html>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).

### The cold world behind the window: *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and Romanian cinema's return to real-existing communism

by [Constantin Parvulescu](#)



Memory's objects line the table of Otilia and Gabita's dorm room.



Catalin Mitulescu's *The Way I Spent the End of the World* (2006) also revisits everyday life of the 1980s.

On November 12, 2006, the French Press Agency (AFP) informed the world that Bulgaria was catching up with the rest of the former Soviet Bloc states and was opening a large-scale exhibit on everyday life under communism. According to AFP, all other former communist countries had already consecrated such sites of memory. Bulgaria, it seemed, was the last. Germany had set the trend. The former German Democratic Republic became the state most rapidly integrated—politically and economically, if not culturally—into the capitalist order. As a reaction to its quick disappearance, an *ostalgia*[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] culture flourished in Germany's eastern provinces and spread, shadowing “European integration,” first through Central Europe and then to the South East, in countries like Romania and Bulgaria. It followed a wave of Euro-enthusiasm and public rituals of “looking back in anger,” and marked the need to cast a different look at the pre-1989 era, a need arising, not coincidentally, after registering the full social and intellectual impact of “real-existing capitalism.”

The emergence and success of the exhibits on everyday life during communism—be they virtual or museum-based, state-sponsored or European-Union-funded—marked a turn in the way in which former Soviet satellites dealt with the past. The exhibits were preceded by (and often ran in parallel to) two other kinds of shows. One group aimed at emphasizing the European (Western) “vocation” of Eastern European culture/ history/ politics, and regarded the post-WWII communist period as an historical hiatus. The other group memorialized the crimes of “totalitarianism,” working to identify and celebrate anti-communism’s heroes, battlefields and victims.

Besides marking the effort to recuperate marginalized aspects of history, the return to the everyday was also an act of revaluation. The implicit goal here was to discover moments of happiness and dignity in the ashes of a politically and economically rejected past, and to bring some color or cast a good-old-days smile, as the AFP report informed its readers, at the nation’s experiences. The shows understood themselves as a corrective against public practices of national soul searching. A too gray image of the days gone by, engendered by previous anti-communist exhibits, needed merriment. A too politicized look needed a chill out. Social relationships, in particular, had to be reinvestigated, and such a reassessment had to start not from above, the site of moral judgment, but from below, from the materiality of the objects this disappearing culture left behind.

The French Press Agency labeled the Bulgarian exhibit in Sofia, “An Inventory





Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2006) depicts the condition of the socially disposable.

Storehouse of Socialism." The show's curator, Georgy Gospodinov, explained the change of course in his country's politics of remembering:

"Apart from the political, pathetic talk about communism, we have tried to show that there are also the everyday stories, the shared memories of the people, as well as many traces, remnants of the communist time still present today as part of our lives." [2]

Such a change in tone was not an isolated event of the post-1989 experience. The way in which exhibits and memorial sites shifted focus from remembering the tragic and the exceptional to the mundane and the ordinary mirrored shifts in historical discourse, the arts, and, indeed, in cinema.



Exteriors of the 1980s.



Apartment buildings and the staple car of the Ceausescu era.

After an initial concern with strong contrasts, tough and allegedly uncompromising moral scrutiny, post-1989 Eastern European cinema toned down its rhetoric. This phenomenon was especially manifest in Romanian productions, which will be the focus of this essay. Whereas the Romanian cinema of the 1990s was a cinema of tragic satires, intense verbal and visual violence, and political allegories, the hiatus of the year 2000, the "anno zero" of Romanian film (in which no film was produced), brought into theaters features about everyday life. These films deftly balanced suffering and nostalgia, squalor and dignity, synthesizing the messages of the previous generation of films and the type of nostalgia expressed in exhibits like the one Gospodinov curated. Films like *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007) or *The Way I Spent the End of The World* (Catalin Mitulescu, 2006) aimed at a material recuperation of *temps perdu*, a rebutted world, ethically, politically and intellectually assigned to the trashcan of history. These films remembered, but without falling prey to uncritical nostalgia. They considered oppression, but no longer directly linked it to government practices and to its leaders. Cinema was now focusing on oppression's spectral dimension—still "there" but harder to pin down in the recesses of everyday behavior.



Voices reconstructing the past in Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006).



Lucian Pintilie's *The Oak* (1992) is more concerned with the



Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* (2006)—cinematic minimalism.

condemnation of "communism."

Compared to Romanian productions of the 1990s, the new films narrated in a less demonstrative way, employing a wider spectrum of grays (or color) in their moral judgment of the past. The films of the 1990s—*The Oak* (Lucian Pintilie, 1992), *Luxury Hotel* (Dan Pita, 1992), *The Earth's Most Beloved Son* (Serban Marinescu, 1993), and *The Conjugal Bed* (Mircea Daneliuc, 1993)—offered angry denunciations, concerned with the perversion of basic human values. Their anger was legitimate; people had had an horrendous life under Ceausescu. But this anger was also troubling. Not only did these films rely on an uncritical anticommunism and indiscriminate condemnation, but their effort to unravel the violence and perversion at the core of the Ceausescu era turned them into sadomasochistic orgies. Putting abuse on record engendered an uncanny fascination with perverse apparatchiks, secret police thugs and domestic tyrants who gave a face to oppression.



*4 Months* underscores the medium's conceptual boundaries.

Responding to this cinematic trend, the most successful Romanian film of the 2000s, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, provides an astute balance of nostalgia and anti-communist memorial.[3] While in the 1990s films, almost every memory of the communist world seems grotesquely perverted and becomes an object of ridicule, *4 Months...* starts by depicting a corner of this world as an oasis of human dignity. In its initial sequences, a certain nostalgic gaze surveys sets, objects, and characters. An initial positive layer of memory is then overwritten by a more problematic gestalt of real-existing communism. But *4 Months...* never comes close to the indignation of the 1990s. A more pensive, less virulent reflection on the past characterizes its narrative, facilitated not only by the increased temporal distance from the Ceausescu era, but also by the awareness that to accuse is to excuse. Black and white incrimination of a perpetrator is always accompanied by an act of forgetting one's own complicity.



Our glimpse into the past is limited ...

*4 Months...*' picture of the 1980s is less judgmental, making it more difficult for the audience to engage in an act of collective condemnation and forgetting. The film shares its ethical minimalism with other features of the period—*The Way I Spent the End of the World* and *The Paper Will Be Blue* (Radu Muntean, 2006). Their loose, open-ended, almost realist-Zavattinian plotlines[4] suggest no urgent desire to formulate a theodicy. They narrate with a clear awareness of the moment of enunciation, its limitations and interests. They opt for minimalism, understanding that the ultimate story about communism is forged in the hegemonic political patterns of the present.

Following this awareness, these films narrow their scope. Time span and depth of incursion shrink. *4 Months...* and *The Paper Will Be Blue*'s plots unfold in one day. They adopt a Zavattinian-like prescription and depict the life of an ordinary person, telling a "found" story.[5] If they are unfaithful to this prescription and venture into the past, they do not go deep. *The Paper Will Be Blue* and *The Way I Spent the End of the World* are set in 1989; *4 Months...* in 1987.





... angled ...



... drawing attention to the act of viewing.



More souvenirs of the Ceasescu era.



Gabita waxing her legs.

*4 Months..., The Way I Spent the End of the World* and *The Paper Will Be Blue* are preceded by or released at the same time as a series of other films set in the Romanian present and strongly grounded in realist poetics: Nae Caranfil's *Philantropy* (2002), Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* (2005) and Cristian Nemescu's *California Dreamin'* (2007).

Mungiu himself started his career with a brilliant tragicomedy, *Occident* (2002), about post-1989 Romania. The films set in the present share the minimalism, the microhistorical approach and the awareness of the moment of enunciation with those that situate their plots in the past. The former, however, narrate with the assumption that the past informs our understanding of the present, while the latter thematize the act of "looking back." [6] Past and present are in a dialectical relation. One is recuperated via a narrative that responds to present-day concerns; the other has a porous texture permeated by a past that refuses to allow itself to be forgotten.

*12:08 East of Bucharest* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006), set in the present, has a plot revolving around the effort to reconstruct an event in the past, and it can be regarded as a mediator between the other films, and even as a manifesto of this generation of filmmakers' poetics of looking back. *12:08 East of Bucharest* problematizes the workings of memory, rendering visible the difficulties inherent to the project of tracing the story of "what really happened." Set in post-1989 Romania, it reenacts a TV talk show whose aim is to reconstitute a historical truth. What happened in Vaslui's central square (a city located north-east of Bucharest) at 12:08 pm on December 22, 1989, on the last day of the Ceausescu regime? Did the people who are now considered the heroes of the "anti-communist revolution" demonstrate *before* or *after* the dictator relinquished power in Bucharest? The truth cannot be established. The film puts on display the biased and biasing act of looking back. Different people with different backgrounds recount different stories. There is no convergence of opinion. Every voice constructs the event in its own way, and "facts" lose their self-evidence. 12:08, December 22 proves to be, as Hayden White puts it, a "(post)modernist event," in which facts become nothing more than a function of narration. [7] Who is telling the story, when, and how are all critical to the reconstruction of "what really happened."

*4 Months...*' realism integrates the historiographical questions raised by *12:08 East of Bucharest* and regards the past as constructed in the act of narration. Besides narrowing its scope and mainly narrating from the perspective of a single character, *4 Months...* employs a series of self-reflexive tropes to remind the viewer that the ontological claim of its representation is limited. What we see and hear is nothing more than an artifact—however, one that strives for objectivity. Compared to a film set in the present that aimed to be a realist account of the last day in the life of an ordinary man with an ordinary name dying an ordinary death in an ordinary hospital—*The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*—*4 Months...* shows an increased awareness of its mediating practices. Both films convey a sense of confidence in the documentary power of the camera, but *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, in its contemporaneity, is closer to Zavattinian-style, neorealist transparency. Set in the past, *4 Months...* is more cautious, more aware that realism and transparency are possible only insofar as their limitations are acknowledged. [8] Its cinematography inscribes an awareness of the medium's boundaries within the cinematic visual expression. It achieves this by a framing technique that both makes the limits of representation visible and constructs the film's visual universe as an object on display. This latter feature brings us back to the exhibits of the everyday. Like such exhibits, the film roots its imagery in the materiality of objects and in detailed reconstructions of interiors. The visual style and mise-en-scene draw attention to the act of viewing and to subject-object separation.



Otilia escapes the ticket checker.



Otilia's boyfriend: both kindred spirit and antagonist.



Hostile service providers.

*4 Months...* is full of souvenirs from the late days of the Ceausescu era. The first fifteen minutes of the film reassemble with ethnological accuracy the look and atmosphere of a 1980s student dorm. We are invited to study, and, if we lived through the period, remember. The film's long takes give us respite to scrutinize the mise-en-scene and indulge in nostalgic recollections. The camera takes us through cluttered dorm units, long and dark corridors, and shared shower rooms. We are introduced to everyday activities and to a host of products, staples of the time-period. We learn about brands of cigarettes, soaps, hairsprays, shampoos, illegal movie-renting, powder milk, instant coffee and pastry; medicine, contraceptive pills, antibiotics and painkillers; dial-pad phones; dorm furniture; and identity cards. All these objects are or could have been on display in Gospodinov's exhibit. Cinema, of course, can do more. While not being able to bring its audience in front of the actual objects, but only in front of their traces on celluloid, it can nonetheless contextualize and document on a larger scale, represent architectural interiors and exteriors, streets, traffic, empty shop windows, and desolate public transportation. Regardless, however, of what is shown and of the accuracy of detail, the way in which the camera frames these objects always reminds us that they are on display. They emerge from the past and we view them with the limited and biasing eye of the present.

This initial nostalgic gaze will soon change. Moving away from objects, which are somewhat innocent, and from the drab but still familiar realm of the dorm, the film becomes more critical, emphasizing Henri Lefebvre's thesis that space, social space in particular, is constructed by human relationships.[9] The initial sequences of *4 Months...* depict the milieu of the dorm as a world of solidarity, a protective matrix endowed with many features of a communist utopia, where money and basic needs never seem to be a problem (problems are usually overcome by mutual help). Property has minimal value, and even though there is commerce, everyone is willing to share. However, once Otilia (Anamaria Marinca) and Gabita (Laura Vasiliu), the film's main characters, exit this microcosm of objects/ fetishes, a different world starts to unfold. Their outside world is increasingly hostile, exploitative and less nostalgia-inducing. Mungiu's film changes registers and puts other memorable facets of Ceausescu's Golden Age on display, framing the utopian niche of the dorm as existing within a landscape of degraded human relationships.

The success of museum exhibits on everyday life derives from the object's fetishistic power to bring back to life safe-haven private spaces constructed by morally acceptable human relationships. Spectators in museums or movie-theaters are given an imaginary access to niche cultures and realms of solidarity that compensated for the tightly-controlled public sphere of the period. The power of Mungiu's film rests in the fact that its narrative also convincingly depicts what happens outside of the dorm's secure space, and suggests the dialectical relation between inside and outside, that one cannot exist without another. Such a dialectical perspective corrects the museum exhibit's sometimes uncritical nostalgic gaze, at the same time as it questions the total rebuttals of the films of the 1990s. A more honest representation of the past needs to rely on an art of combining nostalgia and criticism.

The film's script offers a slow transition from the protective matrix of the dorm to the milieu of traumatic exposure. Human relationships change while characters explore intermediary spaces, in which solidarity and hostility coexist. For example, Otilia's ride on the bus offers a glimpse of such a locus of transition, as do the university hallways, where she meets with her boyfriend, Adi (Alex Potocean).[10] On the bus, she has to avoid the humiliating experience of being caught without a ticket by overly zealous controllers, who often worked as small-time policemen. The film depicts the communist survivor's escape





Their favors must be won with a bribe. Note the pack of cigarettes under Otilia's ID card.



A family reunion.



Gestures of the older generation.

strategies: Render yourself invisible. Don't make quick moves. Pretend you're in deep thought. Mutely ask for help, while you slowly back away toward the door and hope it will open before they reach you.

As the film advances, *4 Months...* puts the 1980s' more disturbing aspects on display, focusing in particular on a certain unmistakable way in which people look and address each other. Fear and suspicion toward the other produce public space. Questionable gender dynamics and verbal violence complete the picture. An almost ontological sense of disappointment and frustration comes through, and any interaction with the other seems to start with a very clear delineation of power relations.

Otilia's ordeal begins on the bus, continues with the selfish rants of her boyfriend and the patronizing treatment of the older generation, and culminates in her interaction with service providers. Their demeanor becomes the ultimate proof of the collapse of the social contract in the 1980s. Nobody believes in communism any longer. The social order survives only due to habit and fear. Ceausescu's Romania has lost its sense of history and no longer regards itself as a collective subject in quest of a common good. In contrast to the dorm's micro-social polity, the film shows only an absence of any trace of solidarity, community, or mutual respect in public space.

The family reproduces this predicament. *4 Months...*' argument against the state is also redirected here against the institution of parenthood. Not only are parents regarded as unable to connect to their children, but also as responsible for the gloomy realities in which their children are living. Otilia has promised her boyfriend Adi to go to his mother's birthday party, and has to go there shortly after she has been raped, a "detail" she does not share with Adi. The festive atmosphere in the young man's family's more prosperous home stands in stark contrast to the unfolding tragedy in the hotel room, where Gabita is undergoing a life-threatening medical procedure. Seated at a table, surrounded by friends of the family, Otilia finds herself among people who are indifferent to her suffering, and with whom she would not be able to find a common language to discuss what she has just been through. Instead, she has to listen to their self-indulgent chatter and taste a yet another, though milder, version of the patronizing talk she has received from the service providers she has just encountered.

Mungiu and cinematographer Oleg Mutu's genius comes to the fore in this sequence. Hitchcockian suspense (created by the secret the character cannot share) and cinematography enhance the film's social commentary. Both emphasize Otilia's internal struggle. We expect the people around her to notice what's on her mind. They do not, and the irony is that most of the guests are part of the medical profession. Terrible things are happening, but the older generation has no clue, and *4 Months...* suggests that even if they had a clue, they would refuse to acknowledge it. In Mungiu and Mutu's transposition, parents look powerless and inclined to rationalization, thrown into the irony of double consciousness by the violence of a regime they failed to stand up to and whose not-so-innocent accomplices they are.

The episode's visual composition complements the lack of dialogue between generations. Sitting at the end of the dinner table, between Adi and his parents,

Otilia occupies the center of the frame. The other guests are mainly off screen. We hear them talk, but we rarely see their faces. We see only hands manipulating silverware or, from time to time, a head bending over a plate. Their voices seem to come from another world, from an “out there.” They are representative of an ideology to whose interpellation Otilia refuses to respond. Her disconnect suggests her solitude and lack of mutual support within the realm of the family. Furthermore, her lack of interaction with these voices “from above” shows a disconnect between “real life,” a life that hurts, and its discursive rendering in the double-consciousness idiom of real-existing communism.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Otilia and Gabita—the story of a friendship.



Inside the hotel, outside the protection of the law.



Negotiations.

*4 Months...* is ultimately the story of two friends and a friendship. Together, Otilia and Gabita confront the social other. Gabita needs an abortion, and the state refuses to help.[11][[open endnotes in new window](#)] The two young women have to rely on the services of an abortionist, offered outside the regulated territory of the law. While the encounter with other service providers within legal boundaries exposes them to the system's hostility and corruption, the encounter with the abortionist ends in trauma. The communist state's distrust and contempt for its citizens' basic needs (on a continuum from food and freedom of speech to contraception) is trumped by a more profound, almost ontological brutality at work beyond the realm regulated by the state. The discourtesy we see coming from hotel clerks is a far cry from the violence the two women are subjected to when in the hands of the ultimate service-provider, Mr. Bebe, the abortionist (Vlad Ivanov).[12]

Mr. Bebe is the ultimate service provider because the nature of his services and the payment he demands give him control over the most intimate aspect of women's health. The fact that *4 Months...*' protagonists are women, women who are raped, suggests that a true history of the Ceausescu era cannot be told without including or perhaps even starting from the way in which its most vulnerable and probably most oppressed subjects have experienced abuse. The more intimate the need of real-existing communism's subjects, it seems, the more abusive the service. This is why *4 Months...* builds the space of the dorm not only around objects and solidarity, but also around its protagonists' privacy. Besides showing objects and salvaging forgotten registers of language, Mungiu's film puts on display, for the spectator's voyeuristic yet supportive eye, the intimacies of a women's world (waxing, showering, etc). Once Otilia and Gabita leave the dorm, their privacy is stripped from them. The abortionist enacts a nightmarish embodiment of such exposure. He is the ultimate other of real existing communism's atomized society, unmasking its proximity to a contractless Hobbesian state of nature.

*4 Months...*' reviews emphasize Mungiu and Mutu's effort to offer a non-voyeuristic picture of female private activities such as grooming, sexual hygiene, and, eventually, abortion. Although a non-voyeuristic camera is an utopia, the film aims at defining a morally acceptable way of representing its characters. It does so by contrasting early glimpses of the women's lives and the pleasures those moments offer the viewer with the abortionist's invasive utensils and a narrative about payment in rape. He demands sex as payment for doing an abortion on Gabita. In depicting these abuses, the camera rejects phallic cinematic omniscience, even as the narrative problematizes many issues around penetration itself. Visually, the film peeps into "the life of others," but it encodes the limits of such an exploration by using a static and limited perspective. Editing is minimal and produces long takes that often do not follow action and dialogue.

The visual limit *4 Months...* imposes through static cinematography takes us back to the museum exhibit, whose recuperation of the past is also limited. Through the window of the exhibit, the viewer sees a more or less authentic assemblage that comes back from history. The glass of the case serves both as an opening into the past and as boundary. It is a physical limitation that separates not only the viewer from the viewed but also the present from the past. The

object on display is lifeless; it just *is there*, deprived of its use value and interaction with other objects in a real-life milieu. From this point of view, the exhibits are far from the everyday. They function on a precondition of symbolic violence. They abuse the object twice: once by pulling it out of history; second, by placing it in the lifeless space of the display.



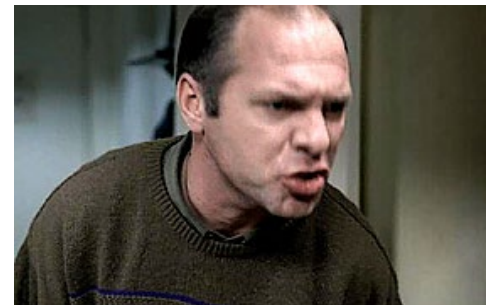
The abortionist changes his mind.  
Instead of money, he asks for sex.



Rape and abortion are the ultimate  
exposure of women's intimacy.



The probe.



The nightmarish other of real-existing  
communism.

The limited perspective and static nature of *4 Months...*' cinematography draws on the conventions of the exhibit and uses them to suggest our distance from the past and to point to a symbolic violence inherent in the act of representation. As film, such an incursion into the past has the power to blur some of the shortcomings of the exhibit. Its spectacular re-enactments and its ability to display temporality—a certain continuous passage of time in the past—render cinematic representation more evocative. But *4 Months...* refuses to hide its conventions. On the contrary, it emphasizes them, and this emphasis is the basis of its self-reflexive realism. The audiovisual medium can vicariously reconnect us to objects, words, clothes, spaces, vistas, and inter-human relationships. However, *4 Months...*' static compositions, its alienating camera angles and long silences emphasize, like the exhibit, that the past remains secluded behind the glass surface of the exhibit window (or the lens of the camera); that it is constructed thorough fetishes and symbols, and that it is as much an enlivened presence as an absence.



Alienating camera angles.

The existence of a real that escapes our symbolic capturing is indexed in *4 Months...* by the use of off-screen sound. As the film progresses, voices become more segregated from bodies. There is a shift of importance from the visual to the aural, from what is seen to what can only be heard, from on-screen to off-screen, from realism's poetics of presence to the horror genre's emphasis on





Long takes of the raped characters induce the somber mood of remembering.



The camera struggles to capture the elusive.

absence. Otilia and Gabita's transition from the secure, cocoon-like space of the dorm into a world that grows in hostility also involves a transition from day to night, from natural to artificial lighting, and from a full mise-en-scene to frames that are visually empty—nothing more than a play of shadows. While the film starts by depicting a cluttered environment, full of props and attention-grabbing objects, each verbally named as if labeled in an exhibit, its last scenes are narrated through non-verbal sound.

This sound-image dynamics stages a double drama. One is the obvious drama experienced by the characters, the transition, typical of a thriller or a horror diegesis, from light and security to darkness and suspense. There is, however, another drama at play, that of the visual representation of the historical event itself. The project of investigating the distressing dimension of the Ceausescu era undergoes its own crisis. Such a drama of *representation* is suggested by the obsessive fixation of the camera on objects and characters, encoding the uneasiness and sometimes panic caused by acknowledging an insurmountable distance between subject and object.

There are several long, static takes in *4 Months...* when the camera stays fixed on Otilia, making it entirely the task of the soundtrack to reveal what is happening around her. As in an exhibit, the staring camera waits for this objectified face to trigger the magic of the fetish and bring back a totality of communicative expressiveness. But the magic is not working. We concentrate on Otilia's face, yet a deep understanding of her tragedy escapes us. Although the film insists on visual details, their role as vehicles of the past and as links to the other is limited. Visual fixation helps us understand, but it also records, as in an Andy Warhol film, an epistemological and ontological dissolution. The object's disintegration in front of the camera and the film's sinking into visual darkness in its final scenes remind us that even the narrow focus on a limited number of objects, a character, or a face, both produces presence and reveals absence. Regardless of the camera's proximity to the object, the distance between the present and the past, as well as between observer and observed, cannot be overcome. The abundant off-screen sound does not compensate for this incapacity of the eye. Sound encodes the real as remainder, as haunting/spectral other, reclaiming a different kind of presence/ absence.



Behind the closed door, Otilia is raped.



Focusing on what is not seen.



Rudimentary contraception.



The past behind the window.



A conversation about preventive contraception.

To give an example of this progression from visual detail to audio expression, let me consider the film's presentation of its protagonist, Otilia. Since visual fixation dismantles the psychological unity of character, what does our gaze encounter when the camera focuses on Otilia's face? What lies beneath the narrative's apparent invitation to empathize with her mute suffering, ranging from humiliation to rape, and her terrorized and terrorizing effort to dispose of an aborted fetus? If we stare enough at her, perhaps we can apprehend something even more threatening than what her narrated experiences introduce us to. Let us recapitulate the visual development of the film: At the beginning, the visuals emphasize objects and location. The camera then turns to characters, closing in on Otilia. It focuses less on action and dialogue, and image-sound redundancy decreases. Once the fetus is expelled, the hotel's surreal, alienating lighting gives way to dark frames whose signifying power is reduced to a minimum. Otilia wanders through the urban environment to find an anonymous trash receptacle in which to dispose of Gabita's abortion. A horror-film atmosphere sets in. For a few minutes, the camera is unleashed, allowed to follow the character. The main visual signifying elements here are its jerky moves and its failed effort to produce discernable images. Otilia's heavy breathing—voice reduced to the real of the breath—is the only signifier the film allows its viewer to hold on to. *4 Months...* ends by staging an effort to return to image and voice—to presence. The camera now rests at an uncanny angle. In the post-traumatic silence of the last scene, Otilia and Gabita try to return to dialogue. But this return is no longer possible. Language has reached its limit.

The experience of rape and abortion encodes both the drama of the characters and the otherness of the world onscreen. We realize that not only the abortion event has come to an end, but also the struggle to responsibly represent this politically traumatized world. In interviews, Mungiu, who wrote the script, talks about the autobiographical dimension of his work.[13] But, in fact, he made a



The abortus—*4 Months'* response to André Bazin's mummy metaphor...



... a comment on cinema's effort to conserve the past.



The film slides into darkness.



film for all those who have already forgotten this world, or have not experienced it at all. *4 Months...*' characters not only embody suffering under Ceausescu; their traumatic experiences also reveal an unbridgeable gap between their world and ours. It is no longer possible to understand them, emotionally, at least not through identification. There is no such thing as a subjective common denominator that can function as a vehicle of empathy across time. Otilia, Gabita and Mr. Bebe remain separated from us by the cold surface of the exhibit window.

The film creates several layers of estrangement—the characters' estrangement within the 1980s atomized society, the spectators' estrangement from them, the Ceausescu-era survivors' estrangement from their past and from themselves. The aborted fetus becomes a metaphor of this alienation. Its rejection allegorizes the failure of the memorial project. Thematizing this failure, *4 Months...* uses it to its advantage, making the project somewhat successful in its very failure. Otilia's run through the ghostly streets of Bucharest to dispose of the fetus reproduces the viewer's own disorientation and anxiety. The effort to understand the past via traditional cinematic means is aborted, dumped. But this failure allows for a different attitude toward its subjects. They are no longer regarded as "one of us," but as other, radically and irrevocably other.

The last scene's post-traumatic predicament attempts to make the impenetrability of the past visible. We have spent ninety minutes in the company of two characters, trying to understand them and their world. But the only thing we have really grasped is how limited our access is. The scene is one of mourning. The two women on screen mourn a child whom they can not imagine bringing into the world. For our part, we mourn the fantasy of an organic link with the cinematic other, who remains opaque—an opaque face as well as an opaque social actor, whom we cannot approach, among other things, because of our inability to understand relationships on the model of friendship that Otilia and Gabita share.

As one of *4 Months...*' reviewers puts it, the abortion is completed, but a feeling of incompleteness persists.[14] The narrative achieves closure, but the characters remain elusive. The subject reveals itself as an empty frame, which the film refuses to fill with a spectacular presence. The last shot thematizes the exhibit window as both a promise of representation and a mark of radical difference. The two protagonists are sitting at the table in the deserted, dimly lit hotel restaurant. Otilia has returned from her adventure dumping the fetus, and Gabita has come down from her room to have dinner, because life goes on, and she is hungry.

Offscreen sound thematizes the camera position as placed both inside and outside the restaurant. We can hear minimal dialogue and music inside, but we can also hear cars on the street. This paradoxical location is clarified by a stroke of cinematic genius. The filmmakers allow the headlights of the passing cars to reflect on the transparent surface that separates the eye of the camera from the mise-en-scene and unravel its existence. We are reminded of our position as spectators. We look at the characters from outside, from behind the glass.

Significantly, there is another glass wall in the background, occupying the



The aural trumps the visual.



Noise, vehement emotion.



The fetus is dumped: a thud in the dark.

surface between the two protagonists' heads. This surface is neither a window nor a mirror, neither transparent nor reflective, but something in between, both opaque and see-through. It is veiled, semitransparent, revealing as much presence as projected shadows. Offscreen music tells us that behind this screen-within-a-screen, a wedding is taking place—the accepted framework of mothering and sexuality. As it turns out, the glass walls create three worlds. First is the space outside, the space of the spectator, behind the allegedly transparent surface of the exhibit window. Second is the narrative space inside the restaurant, where the two protagonists act their own lack of transparency. The third space is the realm of history, of Ceausescu's Golden Age, which we try to get hold of via the mediation of both the cinematic apparatus and the symbolism of the plot. This last space is even more blurred, forever elusive.[15]

The last frames of the last scene present us with an unusual concluding cut, a cut on motion, suggesting a semantic opening rather than an appropriate closure. We see Otilia turning her head, but we never find out toward what. Something out there has drawn her attention, but the film ends without disclosing its source. We are reminded of the first shot, which, without musical support, started by showing the characters in the middle of an activity. We can read this ending in two ways. On the one hand, *4 Months...* has just offered us a “slice of life,” and refuses to yield to conventions of closure. The film ends the same way it began—in ellipsis. On the other hand, this cut whispers to us that something has been intentionally left out, which brings us back to *4 Months...*' thematization of framing. According to this second reading, the film ends not in the middle of a cinematic sentence (ellipsis) but with a question mark: What was left out and why? It is possible that the film leaves out the ultimate close-up, the face-to-face encounter with the other, the intersection of a character's gaze with that of the spectator. Why, then, is this acknowledgement of the camera suggested, yet never confirmed? Why is it constructed as a presence and then edited out as an absence? *4 Months...* is committed to an ethics and politics of realism. Mistrust in the cinematic apparatus is not only the starting point for a critique of representation, but also of an effort to recuperate the anthropological power of cinema. It is by acknowledging its frame (and limits) that film can respond to the call for a scrupulous representation of the other. Otilia's gaze cannot be allowed to reach beyond the already thematized conventions of filmmaking. This would contradict *4 Months...*' poetics, its awareness of the insurmountable distance between representer and represented.



Headlights on Otilia's shirt reveal the space of the spectator.



In the background, another window separates diegesis and history.





The unallowable gaze.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

[1] *Ostalgia* is the anglicization of the German *Ostalgie*, a [portmanteau](#) of the German words *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia). [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

[2] See <http://www.mywire.com/pubs/AFP/2006/11/12/1988298?extID=10037&oliID=229>  
Agence France Presse, Nov 12, 2006.

[3] In the early 1990s, Romanian television ran a documentary series titled *The Memorial of Pain*. The show reported on the injustices of the communist regime and their effect on real and potential political opponents. While the series had a strong impact, it never convincingly argued for the existence of a Romanian Gulag. Its organizing principle was moral outrage.

[4] Cesare Zavattini, the neorealist theorist, is known to have suggested that the plot of a truly realist film represent a day in the life of an ordinary man with minimal dramatic effects.

[5] Zavattini was referring to the found story in the tradition of French literary naturalism, a story that one has discovered in the newspaper. The story of *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* could not have been reported in the communist press. Abortion was not only illegal, but the regime tried to present it as nonexistent. Abortion stories circulated in an alternative, word-of-mouth sphere. Mungiu, however, emphasized that his script was based on a true story, “found” through this alternative route. See also Richard Porton, “Not Just an Abortion Film: An Interview with Cristian Mungiu.” *Cineaste*. March, 2008.

<http://www.cineaste.com/articles/not-just-an-abortion-film.htm>.

[6] This incremental shift of interest from contemporary plots to incursions into the Ceausescu era spurs a dialectical turn in the relationship between past and present. *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* is very aware of the past. Its elderly hero, Mr. Lazarescu, is a product of the days gone by. Everything that happens to him in the present is in dialogue with the past, confirming the Zavattini/ Bazin thesis that, in realist film, history surfaces like a spectral presence in the details of the everyday.

[7] Hayden White, “The Modernist Event.” *The Persistence of History*, Vivian Sobchack (Ed.), New York: Routledge, 1996, 21.

[8] *4 Months...*’ anthropologic effort to recuperate the everyday is suggested

by the film's subtitle, "Memories from the Golden Age." (This is how the sycophantic media called Ceausescu's last years in power.) *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* was also envisioned as part of a series, "Six Stories from the Outskirts of Bucharest."

[9] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 82-83.

[10] Adi, the boyfriend, is both inside and outside the dorm niche. He is a helper, but he is also one of the many domineering figures of this film. Otilia trusts her roommate, Gabita, more than she trusts him, although marriage is or has been in the cards.

[11] In 1966, the Romanian state passed a law (known colloquially as "The Decree") banning abortion. The cruelty of this law comes to the fore only if we understand that it regulated birth control in a society with a rudimentary culture of contraception. Communism did not make much progress in reforming Romania's sexual politics and gender dynamics. It was mainly a woman's responsibility to "take care" not to become pregnant, and expectant unmarried women and single mothers were stigmatized. The only legally approved contraceptive was the condom, but it was difficult to purchase, of poor quality, and was regarded, in a macho culture, as a pleasure spoiler. Contraceptive pills were available on the black market, but their quality was questionable, and, in the absence of reliable medical counsel, few women knew how to use them properly or how they would affect their health. In terms of social engineering, the abortion law was successful. It increased birthrates and created what is known in Romania as the "Decree" generation (Otilia belongs to it and so does Mungiu). Ironically, this generation would be in the avant-garde of the 1989 revolt against the very regime that produced it. [\[return to page 2 of essay\]](#)

[12] The irony of the abortionist's name should not escape us. In Romanian, like in French, "bebe" is a synonym for infant.

[13] Mihai Fulger, *Noul Val in cinematografia romaneasca* (The New Wave in Romanian Cinema), Bucharest: Art, 2006, 81-82.

[14] A.O. Scott, "New Wave on the Black Sea," *New York Times*, January 20, 2008.

[15] In a recent review essay, Ioana Uricaru points to one of *4 Months...*' most suggestive visual metaphors: the close shot of a fish tank at the beginning of the film. According to Uricaru, this image encodes the director's vision of the characters' entrapment in the communist project. The pre-1989 world "is just an immense fish tank, into which the audience is looking through the transparent cinematic fourth wall." We could add here that the fish tank could also function as a metaphor of the link between film and museum exhibit. Ioana Uricaru, "*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*: The Corruption of Intimacy." *Film Quarterly*, Summer 2008, 14



Emir Kusturica on the set of *Underground*.



Kusturica on stage with the No Smoking Orchestra (2008).

## Retrieving Emir Kusturica's *Underground* as a critique of ethnic nationalism

by [Sean Homer](#)

It is now fashionable for many Balkan intellectuals and scholars to dismiss the work of the former Bosnian Muslim, now Serbian Orthodox,[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] film director Emir Kusturica for, at best, pandering to Western Orientalism and Yugo-nostalgia and, at worst, providing “the libidinal economy of Serbian ethnic slaughter in Bosnia” (Žižek 1997a; 1997b, 60-6; 2008, 174). In this paper I want to argue “against the grain” of what now seems to be the accepted and dominant reading of Kusturica’s *Underground: Once Upon a Time There Was a County* (1995). In sympathy with the editors of the volume *Balkan as Metaphor* (2005) I suggest that it is time to retrieve *Underground* as a site “of genuine resistance and triumphant critique, rather than as an apology for nationalism” (Bjelic and Savic 15).[2] In order to do so I will briefly situate *Underground* in relation to Kusturica’s earlier films and his association with the Sarajevo based subculture, the New Primitifs.[3] I will then outline the critique of *Underground*, as it has been expressed by some of Europe’s most prominent intellectuals, most notably Alain Finkielkraut and Slavoj Žižek, as well as more recently by the Balkan film scholar Pavle Levi (2007). Finally I will consider the film as a text that explicitly critiques the nature of historical construction in nationalist mythologies and the cinema’s complicity in these constructions. (I will leave the question of Kusturica’s more recent, apolitical, productions, *Black Cat*, *White Cat* (1998), *Super 8 Stories* (2001) and *Life is a Miracle* (2004) out of this paper.)

### “New Primitivism” and the subversion of official culture

In marked contrast to his current status as an exponent of Serbian nationalist culture and history, Kusturica’s early feature films, especially *Do You Remember Dolly Bell* (1981) and *When Father Was Away on Business* (1985), emerged from a very specific cultural environment that was at once radical and subversive of official culture and ideology.[4] In terms of their cinematography these films were heavily influenced by the Czech New Wave and Italian Neo-realism (Iordanova 2002, 50-60), but this style, in Kusturica’s hands, was in turn inflected through the “New Primitivism” of Sarajevo. These “anti-communist” films (Gocic 21) were set in Sarajevo, and in both Kusturica used local and non-professional actors. The dialogue was in the local dialect rather than standard Serbo-Croat of mainstream Yugoslav cinema, and Kusturica also depicted local Muslim customs, such as the circumcision of the two young brothers in *When Father Was Away*. In these aspects we can see the influence of the Sarajevo New Primitifs (SNP), who were primarily a punk subculture that





Malik sleepwalking in *When Father Was Away on Business* (1985). Fantasy and reality blur in these early intimations of Kusturica's "magic realism."



In his controversial use of documentary film footage in *Underground*, cheering crowds are shown welcoming Nazi troops into Zagreb (1941).



Further jubilant scenes meet the occupiers in Maribor (1941).

originated in the early 1980s, associated with two rock bands: Zabranjeno pušenje (No Smoking) and Elvis J. Kurtovic & His Meteors as well as the satirical radio and later television show *The Surrealists Top-List*. The name, New Primitivism, is sometimes referred to as a response to the "New Romantics" that emerged in the UK as a reaction against the politics, raw energy, do it yourself style and ethos of Punk. The name is also a response, however, to the more well known and sophisticated artistic movement based around the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) in Slovenia.[5] The art critic Nermina Zildzo describes the New Primitiv style thus:

"[T]he main principle of SNP (Sarajevo New Primitives) is the exploration of identity — an attempt to explain one's self in one's own words, through one's own, un-imposed prism. It manifests itself in: an alleged anti-intellectualism; the use of local iconic and lexical properties; the manipulation of prejudices about Bosnians, with a particularly productive use of elements from the Muslim milieu in the Sarajevo suburbs." (qtd. in Levi 63)

The New Primitives were militantly provincial and anti-intellectual. Rather than rejecting Balkan stereotypes, such as the Balkan "Wildman," they embraced these stereotypes and exaggerated them. They adopted an ironic stance regarding official culture and drew upon folk culture as well as the tradition of Yugoslav naïve painting in order to subvert it from within. While the movement was not directly involved in film making, Kusturica's early films were clearly influenced by the movement's aesthetics and he was an associate of the group. [6] As Dina Iordanova observes, Kusturica's early films "confirmed his reputation as an indigenous director" through "the truthful and self-confessed devotion to his roots" (2002, 50). They also confirmed his status as an outsider developing a critique of official culture. According to Goran Gocic, Kusturica was seen to embody and indeed celebrate many of the characteristics of Sarajevo "buddy culture" and its cult of marginality (47-82).

The question arises, then, how did this radical critique of Yugoslav culture in Kusturica's work apparently turn into its opposite? Pavle Levi notes that the central feature of Kusturica's aesthetics, "the eruption of enjoyment in the public sphere" (85), is strongly indebted to the SNP. This aesthetic manifests itself in the exuberant wedding scenes, the sleepwalkers who tread a thin line between the rational and the irrational, the seemingly inexhaustible alcohol-induced states of trance and excess as well as the so-called magic realism.[7] Kusturica's aesthetic is above all an aesthetic of excess which will find its fullest expression in *Time of the Gypsies* (1989) and *Underground*. In the early films this excess functioned as critique, very much in line with the main principles of the SNP, through Kusturica's opposition to both socialist dogma and newly emerging nationalist discourse that was replacing it:

"What the group [SNP] aimed for was not merely a negation of the popular content pertaining to specific cultural ideology (whether state-socialist or ethnonationalist) but, rather, a deeper subversion of the elementary discursive coherence, without which ideologies cannot be generated in the first place" (Levi 70).

Through a systematic "exemption of meaning" (71) the SNP radically questioned all forms of identity, both individual and national. The one thing that they did not question, however, was the stability of their own identity, that is to say, their own "Yugoslavism." As I will argue below, while the advocacy of Yugoslavism may have functioned as critique of the emerging ethnonationalist discourses to



The scenes in Zagreb and Maribor are juxtaposed to the devastation of Belgrade by Nazi bombers (1941).

the 1980s, by the mid-1980s it had become irredeemably associated with Greater Serbian nationalism. In short, an uncritical assertion of Yugoslavism was seen to be synonymous with Serbian nationalism. It was this tendency, Levi argues, that Kusturica succumbed to in the 90s, transforming

"his aesthetic of the sociopolitically inassimilable energetic outpour into an ethnocentrically motivated, quasi-transgressive aestheticization of collective enjoyment" (105).

I will come back to this below but before turning to the main focus of my paper, Kusturica's *Underground*, I should first say something of the historical context that it represents, as this is crucial to understanding the controversy that surrounds the film.

## Once upon a time there was a country ...

Modern Yugoslavia was born out of the conflict of the Second World War and the communist revolution of 1941 to 1945.[8] In fact Yugoslavia was created twice in the twentieth century. The first time through the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, after the First World War, as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and renamed Yugoslavia in 1929.[9] This state was dismembered and partitioned by Germany and its allies in 1941. The country was then recreated by the communist led partisans in 1945 as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, consisting of six republics — Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina — and the two Autonomous Provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo. The partisans were led by the Croatian Josip Broz-Tito, who became the country's Prime Minister from 1945 to 1953 and President from 1953 until his death in 1980. Tito was initially a close ally of Stalin but broke with the Soviet Union in 1948 and Yugoslavia was expelled from Cominform, the International Organization of Socialist States he had helped to found in 1947 in Belgrade. This early break with the Soviet Union as well as the fact that Yugoslavia was liberated through its own means and not with the help of the Red Army bestowed upon Tito's socialist government a legitimacy that the other socialist states of Eastern Europe lacked.

After Tito's death in 1980 the complex system of checks and balances that had maintained the unity of Yugoslavia and constitutionally guaranteed minority rights began to unravel (Gowan 1999). According to Susan Woodward (1995) two key factors contributed to the break-up of Yugoslavia: the fundamental changes that came about in the international order with the end of the cold war (Yugoslavia lost its strategic geopolitical position mediating between the East and the West as well as its role in the Non-Aligned Movement) and the global financial crisis and economic recession of the mid-70s and early 80s. In 1979 Yugoslavia had a foreign debt of \$3 billion (Magaš 80), one year after Tito's death this had reached \$20 billion and was rising (94). The federal government response to this crisis was a harsh austerity programme that resulted in massive unemployment, a dramatic fall in living standards, consumer goods shortages, escalating inflation and falling wages (Woodward 51-2).

Political momentum grew in the country, particularly in Slovenia and Croatia, for a decentralization of power and greater democracy in order to address the crisis. This movement was in turn opposed by "party hardliners" demanding a greater centralization of power in Belgrade in the name of a unitary state.[10]



In *Underground*, Kusturica's aesthetics of "genitofugal libido" is created through the rotational movement of the characters.



Here the dissipation of energy is achieved through the band performing on a spinning wheel which spins at an ever faster rate until the image becomes a blur.

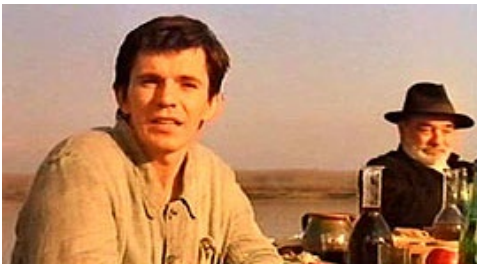




Alternatively the characters spin around the central axis of the camera, as in this shot of Blacky, Marko (Miki Manojlovic) and Natalija (Mirjana Jokovic) singing "Moonshine."



In the final scene all the characters come back to life to celebrate Jovan (Srdjan Todorovic) and Jelena's (Milena Pavlovic) wedding. The small piece of land they are on breaks off and drifts down the Danube, in what critics see as a final "utopian" gesture of Yugo-nostalgia.



Marko's brother Ivan (Slavko Štimac) turns and talks directly into the camera recounting the tales they will

This situation escalated throughout the 1980s as the social unrest, resulting from the austerity programme, intensified and the momentum for decentralization gathered pace. In April 1987 Slobodan Milošević, then Chairman of the League of Communists in Serbia, delivered a virulently nationalist speech at Kosovo Polje, near the site of Serbia's historic defeat by the Ottoman empire. Milošević had risen to power by effectively uniting party hardliners and Serbian nationalists around the issue of Kosovo, he was elected President of Serbia in 1989 and the "liberals" within the Party were expelled.[11]

On the 1st March 1989 the Ljubljana Declaration was released in the Slovene capital calling for greater democracy, the recognition of minority rights and ethnic plurality and in November of 1990 multi-party elections were held in the non-Serb republics. Following these elections a "compromise" was offered to Belgrade — "the transformation of Yugoslavia into an association of sovereign states" (Magaš 105). Belgrade rejected this proposal and in June 1991 Slovenia became the first republic to break away from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Croatia followed suit in 1991 and declared itself an independent sovereign state. With the Federal Republic already disintegrating Macedonia declared their independence in September 1991, followed by Bosnia-Herzegovina in February 1992. As Slovenia had the most homogenous population of all the former republics, its departure resulted in a tense stand off between Ljubljana and Belgrade but only a brief 10 day conflict before the Yugoslav army agreed to pull out of the newly independent country.[12]

The situation with Croatia, with a significant Serbian minority in Krajina (the border region between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina), was very different and in the summer of 1991 full scale war broke out, in 1992 this war spilled over into Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnia-Herzegovina was the most ethnically mixed of all the former republics and when it declared independence in 1992 Serbian forces invaded the following day.[13] Initially both the Serbian and Croatian leadership believed that Bosnia-Herzegovina should be partitioned between their respective republics but they had not taken into account the resistance of the Bosnian population. Under pressure from the European Union and NATO Croatia allied itself with Bosnia against Serbia and the war raged until 1995. It is this history from 1941 to the early 90s that *Underground* presents on an epic scale — the cinema release is 3 hours long and the television release over 5 hours — the controversy that surrounds the film is precisely how this history is represented.



Crowds mourn the death of Tito in Zagreb, overlaid with the sound track of "Lili Marlene," a song with strong Nazi connotations.



Similar scenes of mourning take place in Belgrade, with the same sound track, and strongly associating the death of one dictator (Hitler) with

tell their children, which will begin  
“Once a upon a time there was a  
country.”

another (Tito).

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## From Bosnian “emancipator” to betrayer



Blacky abducts Natalija and attempts to force her to marry him.

With the theatrical release of *Underground* in 1995 the already open divisions between Kusturica, his former associates and the city with which he had become so closely identified were complete.[14] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Kusturica’s status as an emancipator (to use Gocic’s term) of Bosnian culture, language and identity was transformed into that of a betrayer of the national ideal. The film was widely acclaimed by many Western European critics and won the Palm d’Or at Cannes. At the same time, it was greeted by howls of outrage by critics from the non-Serb republics, who attacked the film for being nothing short of Serbian nationalist propaganda. The French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut brought this debate into the wider European public domain when he wrote in *Le Monde*:

"In recognizing *Underground*, the Cannes jury thought it was honouring a creator with a thriving imagination. In fact, it has honoured a servile and flashy illustrator of criminal clichés. The Cannes jury highly praised a version of the most hackneyed and deceitful Serb propaganda. The devil himself could not have conceived so cruel an outrage against Bosnia, nor such a grotesque epilogue to Western incompetence and frivolity." (qtd. in Iordanova 2001, 117)



Blacky, Marko and Natalija sing “Moonshine” at Jovan’s wedding in a shot which very explicitly repeats the earlier shot and links us back to the first abortive wedding.

A key point of contention in the film was the use of documentary footage portraying Slovenes in Maribor and Croats in Zagreb cheering and welcoming Nazi troops in contrast to the footage of devastation wrought on Belgrade by Nazi bombers, the fairly obvious implication being that the Croats and Slovenes were collaborators while the brave Serbs resisted the occupation. Kusturica defended his use of this documentary footage, arguing that he was trying to counter the selective humanism of the West in showing only the Serbs as the aggressor. He was, he insisted, against ethnic cleansing of all kinds, whether it came from Bosnians, Croats or Serbs.[15]

Slavoj Žižek also intervened in this debate with a short article entitled “*Underground*, or Ethnic Cleansing as a Continuation of Poetry by Other Means” (1997a) which subsequently appeared as a section in *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997b) and his influential essay “Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism” (1997c). As Žižek’s reading of the film has set the tone for the wider reception of the film by many on the Western European Left, I want to follow his argument here. Žižek took as his starting point not so much the film itself as the political controversy surrounding it and Kusturica’s own, often unfortunate, response to the criticism.[16] The political meaning of *Underground*, argued Žižek,



Blacky abducts Natalija for the second time at Jovan’s wedding, further reinforcing the link between these two scenes.

"does not reside primarily in its overt tendentiousness, in the way it takes sides in the post-Yugoslav conflict — heroic Serbs versus the treacherous, pro-Nazi Slovenes and Croats — but, rather, in its very 'depoliticized' aestheticist attitude" (1997c, 37).

Žižek supported this argument with reference to an interview Kusturica gave in

which he claimed that the film was not political at all but a “deferred suicide” note for the Yugoslav state. For Žižek:

"What we find here [in *Underground*] is an exemplary case of 'Balkanism,' functioning in a similar way to Edward Saïd's concept of 'Orientalism': the Balkans as the timeless space onto which the West projects its phantasmatic content. Together with Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* (which almost won the Oscar for the best foreign film in 1995), *Underground* is thus the ultimate ideological product of Western liberal multiculturalism: what these two films offer to the Western liberal gaze is precisely what this gaze wants to see in the Balkan war — the spectacle of a timeless, incomprehensible, mythical cycle of passions, in contrast to decadent and anaemic Western life." (38)

Žižek, of course, acknowledges that *Underground* is a multilayered and self-referential film but immediately dismisses this as postmodern cynical ideology. What Kusturica unknowingly provides us with, concludes Žižek, is "the libidinal economy of ethnic slaughter in Bosnia: the pseudo-Bataillean trance of excessive expenditure, the continuous mad rhythm of drinking-eating-singing-fornicating" or ethnic cleansing as poetry by other means. Žižek even goes so far as to draw a parallel between Kusturica and that other infamous Serbian nationalist poet Radovan Karadžić, former President of the breakaway Bosnian Serb Republic and recently captured war criminal (38-39); I will come back to this point below.[17] The problem with *Underground* then, according to Žižek, is not that it is “political propaganda” but that it is *not* political enough.[18]

## The libidinal economy of ethnonationalism

More recently Pavle Levi (2007) has developed a much more sustained critique of the libidinal economy of *Underground*, or, what he calls (following Sandor Ferenczi) Kusturica's aesthetic of “genitifugal libido” (90). *Underground's* highest aesthetic achievements, writes Levi, are when it causes the spectator to suspend all narrative/diegetic concerns in favour of sheer scopic gratification. These “libidinal choreographies,” he argues, produce “autonomous *dynamic systems*” that generate the effect of a dissipation of energy (91). The film accomplishes this through the centrifugal effect achieved by its use of low camera angles and ecstatic bodies organized in circular and rotational movements. An example of this is the extreme low-angle shot of the film's three main protagonists — Marko (Miki Manojlovic), Blacky (Lazar Ristovski) and Natalija (Mirjana Jokovic) — singing the song “Moonshine” directly into the camera, from above, as their bodies spin around its central axis. More importantly, Kusturica extends this idea of libidinal excess beyond the characters themselves to encompass Yugoslav culture as a whole. An excessive libidinal investment is seen to be the essence of Yugoslav culture in all “its dishevelled and polymorphous spirit” (92). In its explicit concern for Yugoslav history and politics, argues Levi, *Underground*

“establishes the sign of equality between this overwhelming enjoyment and the notion, the idea — or rather the Ideal — of ‘Yugoslavness,’ of Yugoslav national identity” (92).

The epitome of this Ideal of Yugoslav identity would be the final “utopian” scene of the film where all the characters come back to life to celebrate Jovan's (Srdan Todorovic) wedding. While they wildly celebrate, the small piece of land they are on breaks away and drifts down the Danube as Marko's brother Ivan (Slavko Štimac) turns and talks directly into the camera (having now lost his stutter) recounting a tale that ends, “Once upon a time there was a country...”



After fighting with Marko over his attempt to seduce Natalija at their wedding, Blacky forces Marko to carry him on his back while braying like a donkey.



In yet one more repeated shot between the two wedding scenes, Natalija forces Marko to carry her on his back around the workshop.



Bato (Davor Dujmovic) celebrates the miraculous recovery of his legs in the final scene of the film in what initially seems to be a utopian reprieve for all the misery that has gone before it.





Blacky is reunited with his dead wife, Vera (Mirjana Karanovic), however, tensions immediately arise between them as they start to argue over Jovan's age and Natalija's presence at the wedding. Natalija and Marko also immediately resume old quarrels in a scene that is perhaps more pessimistic than Kusturica's critics allow for.



Blacky is often cited by critics as exemplary of Kusturica's celebration of the "Balkan Wildman," although he appears to be more like a character straight out of a silent era slapstick comedy.



A cartoon hero? While escaping from captivity in a trunk Blacky succeeds in blowing himself up with a grenade.

As with other critics of *Underground* Levi draws attention to the film's use of montage and documentary footage. Regarding the scenes of Nazi troops entering Maribor, Zagreb and Belgrade discussed above he suggests that the "message" embedded within this sequence could not possibly have been missed by a domestic audience:

"Its primary function is to cinematically empower the discourse of 'Serb victimhood' — one of the pillars of Serb nationalist resentment ever since the late 1980s — while discrediting other Yugoslav nations" (97).

This message is further reinforced by an intratextual link within the film to a second montage sequence which is also accompanied by the song "Lili Marlene." This second sequence also involves crowd scenes in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade but this time assembled for Tito's funeral in 1980. Thus we have a striking juxtaposition of sound and image: a song with Nazi overtones is overlaid on the foremost icon of Yugoslav socialism, the image of Tito himself. Levi writes of this combination of image and song:

"The immediate associational effect thus produced is that of the 'death of a dictator,' but the musically established intertextual link with the earlier sequence evocative of the past ethnic conflicts also aligns the Yugoslav 'dictator' with the 'anti-Serb coalition' led by the Croats and Slovenes." (98)

Levi's critique of *Underground* is by far the most persuasive I have come across but it remains, I want to argue, a rather selective reading of the film. I am absolutely sure that Levi is right that a domestic audience could, and indeed did, read the film in the way he says. But as Iordanova has pointed out, for an *international audience* if *Underground* is Serbian propaganda, then it is so cryptic that no one noticed it as such (2001, 118).

## Ethnonationalist propaganda and/or historical allegory?

The problematic relationship between political propaganda and historical allegory within *Underground* has been extensively addressed (Iordanova 2001, 111-35; 2002, 157-74) and I do not want to rehearse these arguments again here but, rather, to consider the nature of allegory itself. Allegory, in Fredric Jameson's (1981) formulation, functions as an opening up of the text to multiple competing readings and, ultimately, to the untranscendable horizon of History itself. In this sense all texts can sustain not only different interpretations but also contradictory ones. Political propaganda, on the other hand, works through a process of reduction, the assertion of a single unambiguous meaning. *Underground*, I would argue, is an historical allegory in this Jamesonian sense of being open to multiple and, indeed, contradictory readings.

If we take Levi's two examples here we can see how an international audience might read them in rather different ways. Levi reads the final wedding scene, for instance, as exemplary of Kusturica's "Yugoslav Ideal" (94). This scene, however, does not exist in isolation and is in fact Jovan's (Blacky's son) *second* wedding and the *third* wedding of the film. The first abortive wedding takes place between Blacky and Natalija on a boat carrying stolen arms to the resistance. The wedding results in a fight between the two friends Blacky and Marko over Natalija and is then interrupted by the arrival of Natalija's German lover, Franz (Ernst Stötzner). The wedding ends in chaos with Natalija running



Marko celebrates his membership in the communist party by going to the local brothel. Given the weight of ideological critique of this film, there is very little said about its appalling sexual politics.

off with Franz, Blacky captured, and Marko abandoning Blacky and fleeing down the Danube.

The second wedding takes place in Part II in the cellar between Jovan and Jelena (Milena Pavlovic). Once again the wedding ends in chaos with the cellar destroyed, Jelena committing suicide and Jovan leaving the cellar with his father, where he will shortly meet his own death. The second wedding is clearly a repetition of the first:

- the same Gypsy band plays the music,
- there is precisely the same shot of the three protagonists singing "Moonshine,"
- in both scenes Blacky has Natalija tied to his back,
- both scenes result in a fight between Blacky and Marko over Natalija,
- and finally we see Marko being ridden like a donkey first by Blacky and subsequently by Natalija.

The two weddings, then, are quite clearly linked within the film and are not simply scenes of exuberant celebration but sites of tension and ultimately violence.[19]



In order to fool the partisans living underground that World War II is continuing, Marko stage manages an extremely elaborate theatrical set-up, including bombing raids, old news reports and constant updates on the progress of the war.

Is then Jovan and Jelena's second wedding celebration a reprieve, a utopian compensation, for the conflicts and violence that have gone before? I do not think so. It is true that Natalija's disabled brother Bato (Davor Dujmovic) can now walk, that Ivan has lost his stutter, furthermore, Blacky is reunited with his dead wife Vera (Mirjana Karanovic). However, Blacky and Vera immediately start to argue over Jovan's age, and the tensions between Marko and Natalija, over her drinking, are equally evident. Although this wedding may seem to break the repetition established between the first two, the seeds of conflict are already present in this "utopian" scene. If the previous two weddings are anything to go by the future of their little island does not bode well. It would seem, then, that the ending is rather bleaker than at first appears. Herein we can note the conservatism and the pessimism of Kusturica's politics but also a rather more critical view of Yugoslavism than his critics allow for.



Leonid Brezhnev attends Tito's funeral along with many other Eastern European leaders, members of the Non-Aligned Movement and leaders of national liberation struggles, such as Yassar Arafat.



Margaret Thatcher, along with members of the British Royal family and the Heads of all the major Western powers also paid tribute to Tito after his death and in marked contrast to their criticism of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Similarly, the montage sequence of Tito's funeral is open to a number of different interpretations. As Levi notes, the association of one dictator (Hitler) with another (Tito) would be, for an international audience, an immediate effect of this sequence, and the idea of an anti-Serb coalition led by Croats and Slovenes would probably not enter into the picture.[20] From a non-Balkan





After hiding Blacky and his partisans in the cellar, Marko seizes the opportunity to seduce Natalija. As she succumbs to his embrace, she whispers, "You lie so beautifully."

perspective, what is striking in this scene is the parade of world leaders at Tito's funeral, from the Duke of Edinburgh and Margaret Thatcher to Leonid Brezhnev and Nicolae Ceausescu. With post-1989 hindsight and five years of war in the former Yugoslavia, the sequence could just as easily be read as an indictment of cold war cynicism and the hypocrisy of both the East and the West — in the sense that the very powers, who in the 1990s were condemning Tito's Yugoslavia for fostering conflict through its suppression of ethnic identity, as well as its economic mismanagement, were openly supporting the self-same regime in the 1970s and 80s for their own geo-political purposes.

What I am arguing here, therefore, is that we can read *Underground* as exemplary of Balkanism as Žižek suggests, or, as exemplary of Yugoslavism as Levi argues. But we can also read it as a *critique* of Balkanism and Yugoslav history. In other words, *Underground* functions as a critique of the myth of Tito's Yugoslavia at the same time that it is a product of Yugo-nostalgia. The fact that *Underground* is a fundamentally "contradictory" text is what makes it one of the more interesting productions attempting to come to terms with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and its history.



The bride flies through the cellar to meet her groom in a quintessentially Kusturician romantic image.



Jelena descends, angel-like, to her place next to Jovan.



The magic realist effect of this image, however, is immediately dispelled as the camera tilts down to reveal the two men operating the dolly.



The camera then cuts to a medium side shot showing both the bride balanced precariously on the dolly and the men in front of her operating the primitive wind machine.

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Underground as historical reconstruction



*Underground* constantly draws attention to the medium itself through its technical apparatus, such as the use of unusual framing.



An extreme low angle side frame close-up of Natalija at her wedding.



Kusturica also has a preference for unusual camera angles, such as positioning the camera as if in the womb for Jovan's birth.

Žižek and Levi are right, I think, on a number of counts. Kusturica is clearly a film maker who is playing to Western audiences and critics. He is now more popular abroad than at home. His films deliberately exploit an aesthetics of self-exoticization taking up Western European clichés of the Balkans and playing them back to us in exaggerated form. I have already mentioned the example of the Balkan “Wildman” which Kusturica celebrates. We can see this especially in the figure of Blacky in *Underground*, who is shown to have voracious appetites and superhuman strength.[21] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Indeed, one could argue here that similarly to Žižek’s often repeated example of political resistance, Laibach, Kusturica is adopting a strategy of “over-identification,” and by completely identifying with Western stereotypes he reverses the western gaze (Gocic 84). From this perspective the New Primitives can be seen to be adopting a similar strategy to Laibach and the NSK but identifying with different aspects of Yugoslav culture. This, however, only serves to highlight for me the very problematic nature of such a position and political strategy — what one critic (Gocic) can take to be the ironic over-identification with Western stereotypes and myths, another (Žižek) takes to be the unconscious ideological fantasy of the director. As Levi’s points out, however, the SNP were never an explicitly politicized group, unlike the NSK who they parodied (76).[22] The cyclical narrative structure of *Underground* — The War, The Cold War, The War — is also ideologically loaded, replicating Western European views of the Balkans as an atavistic, barbaric space outside of time and history. What I want to argue here, however, is that it is the very multilayered and self-referential aspect of this film, which Žižek so quickly dismisses and Levi does not address in his analysis, that is the whole point of the film and not simply some cynical ideological ploy on the director’s part. There is clearly a politics to *Underground* but not where Žižek is looking for it.

*Underground* represents the history of modern Yugoslavia from 1941, the outbreak of WWII, to 1992 and the Bosnian conflict. The narrative is divided into three parts: The War (1941 — ); The Cold War (1961 — ); The War (1992 — ). Each of these dates represents key moments in Yugoslav history: 1941 — the dismemberment of the old Yugoslav state and the beginning of the Partisan resistance; 1961 — the first formal meeting of the Non-Aligned movement in Belgrade and the opening up of Yugoslavia to the West; 1992 — the Bosnian conflict and effectively the end of the Yugoslav state.

This history, however, is told through the personal histories of the three main characters, two resistance fighters and communist party members — Marko and Blacky — and Natalija, an actress and sometime mistress of Blacky and Franz and later wife of Marko. After being informed on for stealing an arms shipment Marko hides Blacky and his relations in a cellar for the duration of the war. But he then tricks them into believing the war is still continuing and keeps them there for over twenty years. The lives of these three main characters are shown to be inextricably bound up with the history of the country and it was precisely this analogy that many of Kusturica’s critics picked up on. Stanko Ceroric, for instance, was one of Kusturica’s most outspoken critics; he claimed that it was not by chance that in *Underground*:





The constant formal emphasis on the artifice of the image reminds us that *Underground* itself is no less a construct and therefore no less partial and selective.



Blacky kills the "Fucking Fascist Motherfuckers" on the set of *Spring Comes on a White Horse* in one of the frequent slippages between fiction and diegetic reality.



Kusturica plays a cameo role as a war profiteer negotiating the purchase of arms from Marko, flanked by UN "blue helmets."

"The revolution is led metaphorically by a Montenegrin and a Serb; two archetypal Belgrade figures, who together represent the cliché image of Serb heroes created by nationalist writers. These are the people who fight and make love better than anybody else in the world, doubtless thanks to some genetic and spiritual superiority — but who sometimes also happen to sin or do wrong precisely because of this spiritual generosity and naivety. Even their violence only adds to their irresistible charm." (qtd. In Iordanova 2001 116)

If we scrutinize the film a little closer, though, this ideal image of national heroism becomes a little difficult to sustain. As well as being an international arms smuggler, Marko is a rather awful nationalist poet and something of a stage director himself. Marko manipulates the partisans into remaining hidden in the cellar and believing that World War II is still going on through a complex fabrication of reality. He constructs an elaborate mise-en-scène, through news reels, music, bombing raids and special performances by his actress wife, Natalija. Marko in fact writes the scripts that he and Natalija will perform in front of the partisans in the cellar, scripts that constantly glorify Marko's own historical role but invariably involve her being humiliated and abused by the Nazis. In this script within the script Marko arranges for Natalija to escape her captors and arrive at the cellar just in time for Jovan's wedding. She has been tortured and raped and is to arrive at the cellar on the verge of death. Natalija refers to this script as "trash" and insists that what is missing from it is "The truth!" Marko responds:

No text, my dear, has any truth in it.  
The truth exists only in real life.  
You are the truth!  
You!  
You are supposed to be the truth.  
There is no truth, only your conviction that what you say is the truth.  
No, art is a lie, a big lie!  
We are all liars a little bit at least.

This postmodern relativization of truth and representation is consistently emphasized within the film, at a generic level, as I will discuss below, but especially in relation to Marko. In a similar scene between Natalija and Marko earlier in the film, Marko attempts to seduce Natalija by reciting some of his poems to her. Natalija resists him repeating "You're lying. You're lying," to which Marko replies "I never lie, never, never." As she succumbs to his embrace and kisses him, Natalija whispers "You lie so beautifully." [23] It is precisely Marko's skill at deception and lying that makes him so attractive to Natalija but these are also the very qualities that make him completely inappropriate as a national hero in any ideal sense.

If we are supposed to take Marko as exemplary of the brave Serbian nation then we also have to accept that he is a fraud from beginning to end. It is here, then, in relation to Marko as a character that Žižek's comparison to Radovan Karadžić as a poet and ethnic cleansing as a continuation of poetry by other means has resonance and not to Kusturica as director. Given the explicitly deceitful and manipulative nature of this particular character, however, this would suggest that the film is a critique of such nationalist poets rather than an apology for them. Indeed, we are left in very little doubt that this very selective view of history is not to be taken at face value. History is always contested.

*Underground* is a very self-conscious cultural artefact. Both Gocic (2001) and Iordanova (2002) see Kusturica as a distinctively postmodern filmmaker in terms of his films' self-reflexivity, his use of parody, and above all through his





Kusturica concludes his arms deal, self-consciously drawing attention to the role of filmmakers profiteering from the conflict.



A helicopter rises above the tree line and swoops down upon the beach in a shot reminiscent of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), intertextually linking *Underground* with a tradition of critical anti-war filmmaking.

representation of history. Gocic distinguishes five levels of narrative reference in the film: the film diegesis itself, Kusturica's own body of work, Yugoslav cinema history, Yugoslav political mythology and Yugoslav history (146). Iordanova, on the other hand, outlines four broad criteria characteristic of postmodern historiographic film that particularly apply to Kusturica:

- a self-reflexive narrative
- a refusal to take storytelling seriously
- the blurring of traditional boundaries and subversion of hierarchical categories
- the questioning of interpretative conventions, specifically the conventions of historical representation (2002 162).[24]

In the remaining sections of this paper I will broadly follow Iordanova's criteria and consider *Underground* 1) as a self-reflexive text, 2) as a parody of nationalist films, 3) as a subversion of historical truth through the blurring of generic boundaries and thus opening up the possibility of a more radical questioning of the past.

## Narrative reflexivity

Let me begin then with the issue of formal and narrative self-reflexivity. *Underground* is not just a film about the history of a country that no longer exists but also, to borrow the dedication from another controversial film on the Bosnian conflict, a film about "the film industry of a country that no longer exists." [25] *Underground* constantly draws attention to itself as film and as the production of a specific film industry. I have already mentioned above Kusturica's so-called "magic realism" — flying beds, flying characters, telekinetic powers etc. — and *Underground* is no exception in this respect. In the central wedding scene of the film, Jovan and Jelena's wedding in the cellar, we have a shot where the bride flies across the screen with her veil and wedding dress billowing in the wind. This is a wonderfully romantic and Kusturician image, as the bride, angel like, descends into her seat. However, as we see Jelena flying across the screen, the camera tilts down to reveal a rather crude dolly on which she is being carried and then cuts to a side shot so that we can see both the dolly and wind machine constructed by the partisans in the cellar to create this magic realist effect. Not only therefore do we see the magic realist effect but also the technology used to create this effect and the means of its staging.

Similarly the frequent use of low or unusual camera angles, for example, the positioning of the camera as if it inside the womb for Jovan's birth as well as the use of unusual framing, such as side framed close-ups or upside down frames, all draw attention to the medium itself and the mise-en-scène. In other words, the spectators' attention is constantly drawn to the artifice of the image. All of these features point to a very self-conscious piece of film making. And if we do not want to fall into the rather tired postmodern cliché that *Underground* is yet another film about film making and historical relativity, then we would need to say more about the purpose of such self-referentiality.

## History as repetition: from tragedy to farce

Marx once wrote, paraphrasing Hegel, that all great events of history and world historical figures occur twice, "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (1973 [1869], 146).[26] The notion of history as repetition is inscribed within the three part narrative structure of the film but also within the film's mise-en-scène through the repetition of scenes, shots, songs and dialogue. This idea is most conspicuously evident in the central section of *Underground*, "The Cold War."



A poster for the partisan blockbuster *Walter Defends Sarajevo* (1972), *Underground*'s intertextual reference to Yugoslav new film of the 1960s and 70s again links it to a tradition of critical and anti-war filmmaking rather than nationalist propaganda.

Part II is all about the making of a film, but not just any film: it is the filming of the events we saw in Part I. With respect to the film's overall view of history, as I noted above, this presents us with a particularly conservative, fatalistic and pessimistic view, in the sense that nothing can be done to escape this endless cycle of violence.

The structural and formal repetitions, however, could also facilitate a radically different reading of the past. The film within the film is a Second World War partisan movie entitled *Spring Comes on a White Horse* and is based on Marko's own memoirs of his "dead" friend and comrade Petar "Blacky" Popara. The scene we see being filmed is Blacky and Natalija's wedding on the boat containing stolen arms. In contrast to the first scene, however, Marko is shown heroically defending the arms shipment while Blacky is captured trying to rescue Natalija and then executed. Marko and Natalija are invited onto the set to give the film their official stamp of approval and we are presented with the image of Marko (Miki Manojlovic) first embracing an actor (Lazar Ristovski) playing the character of Blacky (Lazar Ristovski) and subsequently the actor (Miki Manojlovic) who plays the character of Marko (Miki Manojlovic), while Natalija (Mirjana Jokovic) kisses the actress (Miki Manojlovic) who plays the character Natalija (Mirjana Jokovic), all the time commenting on how life like the actors look. The situation becomes even more farcical when the "real" Blacky appears on the set and attempts to rescue himself, killing a number of the cast of German soldiers in the process.



Marko heroically saves the day in the partisan movie *Spring Comes on a White Horse*. This film within the film is based on the events we saw in Part 1 of *Underground* but now ...



... re-narrated through Marko's memoirs. Marko (Miki Manojlovic) meets the actor (Miki Manojlovic) playing the role of Marko (Miki Manojlovic) in *Spring Comes On a White Horse*.





Miki Manojlovic as the actor playing Marko (Miki Manojlovic). This doubling of narrative levels and repetition of scenes, shots, songs and dialogue in *Underground* suggests...



... that nothing should be taken at face value. Mirjana Jokovic as the actress playing Natalija (Mirjana Jokovic), who, we should note, had wanted to play the role herself.

In this play of mirror images where performance and reality, truth and fiction, past and present become blurred what we should not forget is that what is being rewritten is History itself, both in terms of the film's diegesis (Marko's memoirs) but also in relation to *Underground* as a text. As if to underscore the director's own self-consciousness of, or complicity with, this fabrication of history towards the end of the film, when we move to the present conflicts and wars of succession, Kusturica himself plays a cameo role in the film as an arms dealer and war profiteer. This very overt narrative repetition and doubling of characters within the film serves to open up a critical space whereby we can see the past being constantly rewritten, reconstructed and manipulated and therefore always open to alternative and more radical interpretations. An example of such an alternative reading would be the location of the film within the history of Yugoslav cinema as well as the broader socio-political history of the former Yugoslavia as I shall now discuss.



Marko opens a cultural centre in honor of his "dead" friend and comrade Petar "Blacky" Popara.



Politician, hero of the resistance, poet and stage director, Marko would appear to be the ideal renaissance man, were it not for the fact that he is fraud from beginning to end, as Kusturica never fails to remind us.

## A film industry that no longer exists

The parody of partisan films is more than simply farce. Partisan films were one of the principal and most popular genres produced by this film industry that no longer exists. The classical period of Yugoslav partisan films was between the end of the Second World War and the early 1950s, what is usually referred to as the Red Wave. In the 1960s a new generation of film directors, the most well known in the West being Dušan Makavejev, reworked the genre into more personal and ambiguous visions of the past, much as Hollywood directors of the 1980s have done with the Vietnam War.[27] What was known at the time as New Yugoslav cinema but has posthumously been labelled "Black film" or the "Black Wave" was particularly critical of the ultra-realism and kitsch of the Red Wave. After the political clampdown across Yugoslavia in the early 1970s, there was a revival of Red Wave films. Partisan films have continued to have a resonance in post-Yugoslav film production and the influence of the Black film of the 1960s can be seen in both *Underground* and Dragojevic's *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*. [28] Partisan films were also central to the New Primitiv critique of official culture; No Smoking called their first album *Walter* after the Partisan blockbuster *Walter Defends Sarajevo* (1972). [29]

Originally, partisan films served purely propaganda purposes, idealistically glorifying and confirming a revolutionary past and at the same time reinforcing this revolutionary spirit in the heroic struggle to construct a socialist society out of the ruins of the war. Partisan films also represented a particular national aesthetic, "nationalist realism," which Tito's government promoted as an alternative to the "socialist realism" of the Soviet Union. These films were technically crude, stereotypical and simplistic. They were initially directed for a domestic audience and were very popular films. For instance, the second Red



Marko and Blacky (as Laurel and Hardy) in slapstick mood as they head-off to abduct Natalija.



Natalija's theatrical performance is sheer melodrama, but no more so than her performance for the partisans in the cellar.



The inclusion of archival documentary footage raises the issue of cinematic representation and historical truth.

Wave also tried to break into the international market with big multinational productions and such international stars as Richard Burton in the role of Tito. As Daniel Goulding (2002) writes, partisan films were also imbued with an intense sense of nationalism and pride as a result of Yugoslavia's unique historical experience:

"Yugoslavia was the only European Communist government established after the war whose legitimacy was founded primarily on its own efforts and not the sponsorship and the political and military domination of the Soviet Union." (23)

Partisan films are frequently referred to as Yugoslav Westerns, and they share something of the mythic structure of the North American Western, in the sense that they stage a primal "conflict between civilization and wilderness." For the partisan film, this meant

"constantly returning to the pioneering days of Tito's Communist party and the founding mythologies of the state during the Nazi occupation in the second world war" (48).

This is, of course, precisely the territory of Kusturica's *Underground* as well as of the film within the film.

*Spring Comes on a White Horse* is a classic partisan film in its low production values, stereotypical characters and over dramatization, and could be read merely as a parody of the genre, except that the actual "historical" events that it is supposedly based upon, and we saw in the first part of *Underground*, are no less a critique of the genre and the history that it represents. The two central characters of *Underground*, Marko and Blacky, are, as I have argued above, womanizers, crooks and liars who act more out of self-interest than ideological conviction. This is hardly the image of heroic resistance fighters and neither is keeping a population imprisoned in the dark for 20 years many leftist's idea of how to construct socialism. *Spring Comes on a White Horse* is at once a nostalgic homage to a film industry that no longer exists and at the same time it foregrounds the complicity of that film industry in the construction of historical memory and national mythology. Without wishing to labour the point, if *Underground* is in any sense a propaganda film, it is because it is a film *about* propaganda films.

## Generic discontinuities and historical truth

In the opening scene of Part II (The Cold War) Marko is opening a cultural centre in memory of his old friend and national hero Petar "Blacky" Popara, and he takes the opportunity to recite one of his poems. Politician, hero of the resistance, poet, stage director, script writer and actor, it would appear that Marko is something of a renaissance man were it not for the fact that he is a complete charlatan and motivated solely by self-interest. The character of Marko, however, also serves to draw attention to the existence within the film of a range of cultural forms and mutually exclusive genres. Most obviously there is the film within the film discussed above, but there is also a staged play within the film as well as the montage sequences of documentary footage. *Underground* contains elements of slapstick humour and Natalija's theatrical performance is sheer melodrama.

But, as we have seen, it has been the inclusion of archival footage that has aroused most attention and criticism. The combination of different forms and genres: feature film and documentary, historical drama and personal memoir, lyric poetry and farce, serve to highlight the difficulties and tensions of





“A war is not a war until a brother kills a brother.” Ivan confronts Marko with his lies and deceptions before killing him and committing suicide himself (his second suicide attempt in the film).

representing the past but also how that past has been inscribed in a multiplicity of texts — films, books, poems, art works — thus creating a specific national mythology. The different texts and genres within *Underground* do not sit comfortably together but create their own internal tensions within the film text itself.

Documentary is conventionally understood to be the opposite of a feature film. A documentary presents us with “real” information and historical facts; it aims at the truth rather than the imaginative reconstructions of fiction films. What happens, therefore, when these two opposing genre are combined in a single artefact? Does the inclusion of documentary footage provide historical legitimacy for the fictional account, or does the fictional account undermine the veracity of the documentary presentation? As can be seen from the conflicting interpretations of *Underground* it clearly does both.



The archival footage is usually tinted and in a number of sequences used as back projection, drawing attention to both its presence in the film and the fact that the image has been manipulated.



At times Marko is seamlessly edited into sequences with Tito, reminding us of the old Stalinist practice of editing out discredited figures from visual images and hence from the historical record.



Marko shakes hands with Tito.



Marko exhorts cheering crowds in Belgrade to save “the heart of the country” and defend Trieste, which would shortly be taken under Allied control and then returned to Italy.

What I think is notable in *Underground*, however, is the very diversity of ways in which this footage is incorporated into the film. There are scenes in the film where the documentary footage is simply spliced in, such as the bombing of Belgrade in 1941 or the controversial scenes of cheering grounds in Maribor and Zagreb. The archival footage has frequently been tinted so that we are aware



1992, Blacky is still fighting his own "personal" war against "Fucking Fascist Motherfuckers" in a seemingly relentless cycle of violence.

that this material has been touched-up and manipulated. The documentary footage is also used very crudely and obviously as back projection, while in other instances Marko is seamlessly edited into sequences with Tito — we see Marko apparently shaking hands with Tito or standing with him on a balcony watching a May 1st parade. The overall effect of this diversity and integration of archival footage and fictional characters is to stress, yet again, the way in which film can be used, and has been used, in the reconstruction of Yugoslav history and national mythology.

The gap between the representation and history itself is always quite evident, history as a text is always constructed and therefore always-already ideological. It is worth recalling here Fredric Jameson well known formulation from *The Political Unconscious*,

"history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the real itself necessarily passes

through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious” (35).



As Blacky leads his men and refugees back into the cellar he abandoned 30 years previously, the utter senselessness of these cycles of violence is underscored.



UN “blue Helmets” transporting refugees through the underground tunnels for a price, as the UN are consistently shown to be complicit in the recent violence in Bosnia.

It is this level of textualization and narrativization that *Underground* consistently foregrounds and in doing so emphasizes the ideological operation inherent in *all* narratives of the past. To give one last example, in the concluding montage sequence of Part I we see Marko addressing a large crowd in Belgrade, his revolutionary rhetoric stirring the crowd to the defence of Trieste through armed resistance. The city of Trieste, on the border between Slovenia and Italy, was liberated by Yugoslav partisans in 1945 but almost immediately brought under Allied control and subsequently returned to Italy. It is always, it seems, the unreliability of Marko’s historical perspective that the spectator is left with.

## Conclusion

Dina Iordanova has argued that Kusturica’s “choice,” as it is usually termed, of siding with the Serbs was not so much a choice *for* something (Serbian nationalism) as *against* something (nationalism in general and Bosnian nationalism in particular). However, as an active choice it did facilitate his recuperation, as is now clearly evident in his public profile in Serbia, into a nationalist discourse that he himself rejected (2002 20). Kusturica now lives, at least part of the year, in his newly built “traditional” Serbian village, Küstendorf, in the mountains Southwest of Belgrade. What we can see here is the difficulty facing critics of nationalism in the Balkans, of circumventing that ideology, or of maintaining a position outside of it that is not itself open to recuperation by nationalist discourses. I have argued in this paper that, however, flawed and contradictory, it is possible to read Kusturica’s *Underground* against the grain of ethnic nationalism and as a critique of this process rather than an apology for it. If we read *Underground* as a film, and not simply as a vehicle for the dominant ideology of Serbian nationalism, then we can see it as a critique of Tito’s Yugoslavia and the film industry’s role in reconstructing history and nationalist mythologies. This entails reading *Underground* as a film *about* propaganda though rather than *as* propaganda.



In one of many cinematic intertextual references in the film, Kusturica cites Hitchcock.



Kusturica cites Tarkovsky in a game that reminds us that *Underground* is as much about cinema history as it is about socio-political history.

[Go to Notes page](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### Notes

1. At the time of *Underground*'s release Kusturica was known internationally as a Bosnian director of Muslim descent. After the controversy surrounding the film and the Yugoslav wars of succession he now identifies himself as Serbian Orthodox. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. I want to make this argument specifically in relation to *Underground* and would not wish to extend it beyond this film, especially in the light of Kusturica's public statements in the late 90s and since, culminating in his public support for the Serbian nationalist campaign "Solidarity – Kosovo is Serbia" formed in the final months of negotiations for Kosovo independence. Kosovo finally declared itself to be an independent sovereign state on February 17th 2008.
3. The New Primitives spelt their name without the "e" (Levi 63 ft. 4).
4. In this section I draw on Iordanova (2002), ch. 1; Gocic (2001), ch. 1. The best account of the New Primitives so far published in English is Pavle Levi's (2007), ch. 2.
5. See Monroe (2005) for an account of the NSK.
6. Kusturica plays base for the renamed No Smoking Orchestra and his son is now their drummer. The Orchestra scored Kusturica's last two feature films, and *Super 8 Stories* is a documentary of their recent European tour. As Levi points out though, since 1997 there have been two No Smoking Orchestras, one in Belgrade consisting of those members of the band who sought refuge there during the Bosnian war and the other in Sarajevo consisting of those who remained in the besieged city (62).
7. Levi notes that Kusturica's version of magic realism differs significantly from that of Gabriel García Márquez's; whereas Márquez strove for the poetic transformation of the object world, Kusturica saw Yugoslav reality itself as enchanted. Furthermore, "in this vision the use of magical reality as the site of an opposition to the various forms of social and political reification does not automatically preclude its potential to also serve as the subject matter for a national panegyric" (86-87).
8. I draw extensively in this section on the work of Magaš (1993) and Woodward (1995).
9. The relationship between modern Yugoslavia and its predecessor as well as



the question of whether or not Tito's partisans led a genuine social revolution became highly contested in the period I am concerned with here (the 1980s and 90s) as it brought into question the very legitimacy of the federal state and its constitution, see Magaš ch. 1.

10. Woodward notes that the drive towards centralization to address the economic crisis facing Yugoslavia was not initially motivated by "Greater Serb Nationalism" but by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) itself. The IMF attributed many of the economic problems facing Yugoslavia with the "excessive decentralization of the banking and foreign exchange systems" and it urged greater federal control over the economy and the Central Bank. In 1987 the IMF made further support for Yugoslavia *conditional* upon these changes and the reform of the 1974 constitution (74-82). Slovenia was the most outspoken opponent of these changes and in October 1987 walked out of the federal parliament (along with Croatia) refusing to contribute any longer to the federal budget.

11. The situation is by no means as straight forward as this simple opposition between liberal, democratic, reformers and hardline, totalitarian, nationalists suggests. Woodward points out that Milošević was a 1980s liberal in the sense that he combined economic liberalism with political conservatism, a trend that we can see right across Europe and North America at the time and one reason why the West supported him until the early 1990s (106). On the other hand, the wealthier more Western oriented regimes, such as Slovenia, were in fact more conservative and nationalistic in their response to the issue of political and economic reforms (61).

12. Woodward observes that both the EU and the US repeatedly failed the former Yugoslavia by prematurely recognizing the national sovereignty of the new states without any accompanying guarantee of minority rights (143); a mistake they have once again repeated, I might add, with the recognition of Kosovo.

13. Strictly speaking the Yugoslav army occupied Bosnia to maintain the territorial integrity of the country, something it was legally entitled to do, in practice, however, the JAL had now become irredeemably associated with Serbia and its territorial aspirations.

14. The antagonism between Kusturica and his fellow Bosnians began in 1992 when he published a plea to stop the war in Bosnia and criticized the nationalists who had started it. Branka Magaš also reports a meeting that she had with Kusturica in Slovenia during the filming of *Time of the Gypsies* where he strongly condemned nationalism (Magaš 134). [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]

15. In response to this argument Levi remarks that Kusturica made no attempt to show Bosnian Serbs committing atrocities such as the destruction of Vukovar in Croatia or the siege of Sarajevo. "So much," he concludes, "for *Underground* as a cinematic contribution to the critical discourse on selective humanism" (98).

16. Kusturica simply ridiculed critics such as Finkelkraut rather than engage

seriously with their criticisms. See Finkelkraut's original article, Kusturica's response to it and Finkelkraut's unapologetic reply after finally seeing the film on the website:

<http://www.kustu.com/w2/en:polemics>.

17. As Bjelic argues, this comparison is rather 'a hard sell' and paraphrasing Sartre's comment regarding "lazy Marxists" writes 'Yes, Kusturica, like Karadžić, poeticises "the wild Serb man" but not every "wild Serb" is Kusturica; yes, Karadžić is a poet, like Kusturica, but can Karadžić make [*Underground*]?' (2005 119 ft 29).

18. For a fuller critique of Žižek's reading of Kusturica see Homer (2007) and in particular his failure to account for his own position and the rise of Slovene nationalism during the period this critique of *Underground* was developed.

19. If we look at central wedding scenes in *When Father Was Away on Business* or *Time of the Gypsies* we can see a similar pattern emerging.

20. The equation of socialism with fascism is a specifically cold war ideology and when it is resurrected again today, as Žižek has argued, it has particularly unsavoury political connotations. Such a view results in a profoundly reactionary view of history whereby fascism inevitably becomes "the lesser evil, an understandable reaction to the communist threat" (2005, 8). Even given the reactionary nature of Kusturica's current politics I do not think this is a view he would be arguing for.

21. When Blacky is captured by the Nazis he is tortured through electrocution. However, as an ex-lineman, he can absorb electrical current to the point that it kills the average person. [[return to page 3](#)]

22. See Ian Parker (2007) for a discussion of the psychoanalytic understanding of over-identification and some of its problems as a political strategy.

23. Natalija repeats this line again in Part II as she and Marko make-up after another fight about his deceptions.

24. Iordanova has taken this modified list of characteristic features from Igor Krstić (1999 145), who has in turn paraphrased Robert Rosenstone's (1996 206). For my own views on postmodern historiography see Homer (2006).

25. See Srdjan Dragojević's *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*. This film was also greeted with accusations of Serb propaganda upon release.

26. It is not clear, however, that Hegel ever wrote this and Marx seems to be developing the idea from his correspondence with Engels. Marx, of course, never believed that history repeated itself in this fashion.

27. *Underground*, for example, makes explicit reference to both Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, which again suggests that Kusturica is locating his film within a tradition of anti-war cinematic production (see Iordanova (2002), ch. 3 for a discussion of the intertextual references and "makeovers" in *Underground*).

28. See Krstic (2000) for a discussion of the both Hollywood and domestic references in *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* that share many similarities with *Underground* and locate Dragojevic's film in the traditions of Black Wave film, post-classical Hollywood westerns and critical Vietnam movies.

29. See Šešic (2006) for a discussion of *Walter Defend Sarajevo* and Levi 64-67 for an analysis of the New Primitivists' interest in the film.

## Bibliography

Bjelic, Dušan I. "Global aesthetics and Serbian cinema in the 1990s." *East European Cinemas*. Ed. Anikó Imre. London: Routledge, 2005. 103-119.

Bjelic, Dušan I. and Obrad Savic. *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005.

Finkelkraut, Alain. "Kusturica's Imposture." *Le Monde* 2 June 1995: 16  
<http://www.kustu.com/w2/en:polemics>.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Dream Propaganda of Emir Kusturica." *Liberation* 30 October 1995: 7  
<http://www.kustu.com/w2/en:polemics>.

Gocic, Goran. *Notes from the Underground: The Cinema of Emir Kusturica*. London: Wallflower Press, 2001.

Goulding, Daniel J. *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience*. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

Gowan, Peter. "The NATO Powers and the Balkan Tragedy." *New Left Review* (I) 2234 ((March/April 1999): 83-105.

Homer, Sean. "Narratives of History, Narratives of Time." *On Jameson: From Postmodernism to Globalism*. Eds. Caren Irr and Ian Buchanan. Albany: SUNY Press, 2006. 71-91.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Nationalism, Ideology and Balkan Cinema: Re-reading Kusturica's *Underground*." *Did Somebody Say Ideology? Slavoj Žižek and Consequences*. Eds. Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007, pp. 237-248.

Horton, Andrew James. ed. *The Celluloid Tinderbox: Yugoslav screen reflections of a turbulent decade*. Shropshire, UK: Central Europe Review, 2000.

Imre, Anikó. ed. *East European Cinemas*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Iordanova, Dina. *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*. London: BFI Publishing, 2001.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Emir Kusturica*. London: BFI Publishing, 2002.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Methuen, 1981.

Krstic, Igor "Representing Yugoslavia? Emir Kusturica's *Underground* and the Politics of Postmodern Cinematic Historiography." *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis. Media & Orlog* 2 (2) (December 1999), 138-59.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Showtime Brothers! A vision of the Bosnian war: Srdan Dragojevic's *Lepa sela, lepo gore*." *The Celluloid Tinderbox: Yugoslav screen reflections of a turbulent decade*. Ed. Andrew James Horton. Shropshire, UK: Central Europe Review, 2000. 43-62.

Kusturica, Emir. "My Imposture." *Le Monde* 26 October 1995: 13  
<http://www.kustu.com/w2/en:polemics>.

Levi, Pavle. *Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Magaš, Branka. *The Destruction of Yugoslavia — Tracking the Break Up 1980-92*. London: Verso, 1993.

Marx, Karl. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings, Vol. 2*. Ed. David Fernbach. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [1869]. 143-249.

Monroe, Alexei. *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and the NSK*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005.

Parker, Ian. "The Truth about Overidentification." *The Truth of Žižek*. Ed. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp. New York: Continuum, 2007. 144-160.

Rosenstone, Robert, A. "The future of the past: film and the beginnings of postmodern history." *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*. Ed. Vivian Sobchack. London: Routledge, 1996. 201-218.

Sešic, Reda. "Walter Defends Sarajevo." *The Cinema of the Balkans*. Ed. Dina Iordanova. London: Wallflower Press, 2006. 107-115.

Woodward, Susan L. *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War*. Washington D.C: The Brookings Institution, 1995.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Underground, or Ethnic Cleansing as a Continuation of Poetry by Other Means." *InterCommunication*, 18 (1997a)  
[www.ntticc.or.jp/pub/ic\\_mag/ico18/intercity/zizek\\_E.html](http://www.ntticc.or.jp/pub/ic_mag/ico18/intercity/zizek_E.html)

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London Verso, 1997b.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism." *New Left Review* (I) 225 (September/October 1997c): 37-40

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Two Totalitarianisms." *London Review of Books*, 27.6 (17 March 2005): 8.



\_\_\_\_. "The Military-Poetic Complex." *London Review of Books*, 30.16 (14 August 2008): 17.

## Filmography

*Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. United Artists, 1979.

*Black Cat, White Cat/Crna macka, beli macor*. Dir. Emir Kusturica. USA Films (USA), Artificial Eye (UK), Komuna (Yugoslavia), 1998.

*Do You Remember Dolly Bell?/Sjecašli se Dolly Bell?*. Dir. Emir Kusturica. International Home Cinema (USA), Artificial Eye (UK), 1981.

*Life is a Miracle/Zivot je cudo*. Dir. Emir Kusturica. Artificial Eye (UK), 2004.

*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame/Lepa sela, lepo gore*. Dir. Srdjan Dragojevic. Fox Lorber (USA), 1996.

*Super 8 Stories*. Dir. Emir Kusturica. Orfeo Films International, BFI Programme Unit/ICA Cinema (UK), 2001.

*Time of the Gypsies/Dom za vešanje*. Dir. Emir Kusturica. Artificial Eye (UK) 1989.

*Underground: Once Upon a Time There Was a Country/Podzemlje: Bila jednom jedna zemlja*. Dir. Emir Kusturica. New Yorker Films (USA), Artificial Eye (UK), Komuna (Yugoslavia), 1995.

*Walter Defends Sarajevo/Valter brani Sarajevo*. Dir. Hajrudin "Šiba" Krvavac, Bosna Film, 1972.

*When Father was Away on Business/Otac na službenom putu*. Dir. Emir Kusturica, Cannon Films (USA), Artificial Eye (UK), 1985.

*WR: Mysteries of the Organism/WR — Misterije organizma*. Dir. Dušan Makavejev. Cinema 5 Distributing, 1971.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## *Burnt Oranges. The Stream of Life* — dimensions of exile

by [Ilene Goldman](#)



"Como cuando" — "it's like when." The film begins with a list of remembrances and a montage of images blurred to create a city in motion.



"When in your letters you mentioned Buenos Aires, I would try to match your words with the images of my inner city."

"There are no statistics of the soul. There is no way to measure the depth of the cultural wound... we cannot know to what point we have been mutilated in our consciousness, our identity and our memory."  
— Eduardo Galeano

Like many of her contemporaries, Silvia Malagrino left Argentina in 1978 to escape the repressive military dictatorship.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Three decades later, she filmed her return,[2] reflecting her desire to know and remember her abandoned country, to find a way to be present and absent from the histories that haunt her. She needed "to tell," as Hamid Naficy describes it,

"about the causes, experiences and consequences of disrupted personal and national histories" (Naficy "Home, House" 105).

Her documentary *Burnt Oranges* (2005) situates her personal journey within the collective Argentine memory, building an autobiography very much linked to the social whole. In contrast and complement, Malagrino's 2005 video installation, *The Stream of Life*, combines footage captured during the making of *Burnt Oranges* with x-rays of her own body to arrive at a very different kind of autobiography, an exploration of self-identity.[3]

The existence of two videos from the same footage forces us to acknowledge that while her history is part of a collective, her need to relate it is part of a personal and complex narrative. In *Burnt Oranges* Malagrino negotiates her repositioning into a politically volatile past via a combination of self-reflexive documentary and experimental film forms, using her memories to discover what her "home" has become. In *The Stream of Life*, Malagrino's connection to Argentina's violence is at once visceral and haunting. With these two works, Malagrino navigates what Janet Walker terms the "fluid boundaries of memory and history (and fantasy)" to connect her autobiography to collective historical reality (817). Malagrino's journey, with its twin filmic expressions, demonstrates that in the case of political exile, the personal and the political, the collective and the individual, and the public and the private are all inextricably intertwined.

Mapping the history of a collective memory:



Claudio's letters and drawing on a napkin with an inscription, "Sun lover of light Claudio."



Claudio's photo on the banner of the disappeared, his fate uncertain, but his history etched in memory.



General Díaz Bessone is unwilling to admit any wrongdoing.

## Burnt Oranges

Malagrino begins *Burnt Oranges* with an explanation, telling the viewer that she seeks simultaneously to recapture the Buenos Aires she left behind; to discover the truth of her friend Claudio's disappearance; and to illuminate the aftermath of state terrorism and military rule in Argentina. Having fled Argentina as a university student, Malagrino has a lifetime of memories about her homeland; her project is to tell the history of this moment in Argentina to an audience that is not informed, but is active and wants to understand the role that individuals can play in repressive situations (Malagrino 2008). Structured around a first-person narration speaking to a "tú" (you), the film relies on a complex combination of archival news footage, talking-head interviews, contemporary protest images, and lyrical image fragments to recreate the past.

As Patricia Aufderheide has noted of trends in first-person video storytelling, *Burnt Oranges* lies

"in between the essay, general reportage and the well-told tale" (1997).

Malagrino's documentary fits into this trend, furthered by the development of accessible digital media. Like the pieces Aufderheide studies, *Burnt Oranges*

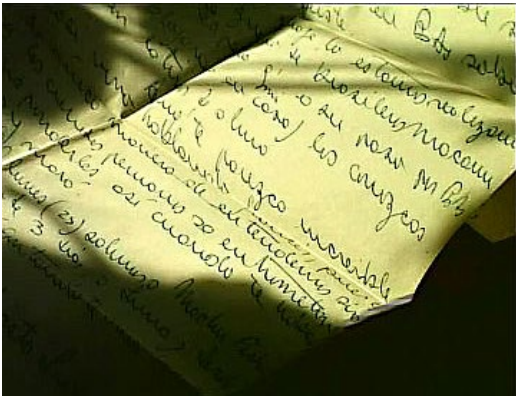
"is marked not only by the first person voice in testimonial, but also by the bringing of the viewer into the world of the storyteller's experience...Indeed, it typically does not make a direct argument, but an implicit request for the viewer to recognize the reality of the speaker and to incorporate that reality into his or her view of the world" (1997).

In attempting to reconstruct the Buenos Aires of her youth and the history of the Argentina she left behind, Malagrino builds an imaginary Argentina, using her interviews and memories as alternating construction materials. Her subjectivity alternates, too, between witness and teacher, inserting itself in the discourse by refusing to let the history be forgotten. Neither a "talking-head" documentary nor a "personal essay," *Burnt Oranges* entices the viewer with its poetic beauty even as it instructs us about a terrible moment in history. The very combination of beauty and politics enables us to understand Malagrino's loss and her nostalgia. As she rediscovers her homeland, unraveling the role of its complex political history in her personal history, we begin to understand more deeply how Argentine identity must be affected by the aftermath of the military dictatorship. Malagrino draws on and contributes to a collective history and memory in documenting this personal journey because her individual experience cannot exist without the shared one.





Bob Cox, journalist and former editor of the *Buenos Aires Herald* remembers how optimism after the coup quickly turned to fear and disbelief.



"Sometimes I reread his letters. I take time to go through his big and slanted handwriting. I am attracted to the wide spaces between the lines, as if in these pages we could breathe the magnitude of his freedom. Claudio disappeared before he could erase the question mark he drew under his name."

Since she cannot literally return to the past, she must travel there in her memory and that of Argentines who stayed when she left. Her nostalgia and her guilt demonstrate some of personal toll taken by military dictatorship.

The film opens with blurred, grainy, black and white images of Buenos Aires, the city in constant motion, as the narrator begins mid-thought, "Cómo cuando," with a long list of "It's like when" remembrances. The narrator seeks to establish her bearings, literally and metaphorically. She remembers that before she left, her interlocutor, her "tú," wrote a poem, "La receta para no olvidar" (the recipe for not forgetting) and that she forgot "you had written it." She explains that her grandfather believed that one's inner map, one's

"intimate geography, can be inaccurate or distorted, but is always good enough to get a person home."

Malagrino's inner map sends her walking the streets of Buenos Aires to find an orange tree-lined street that she walked with her friend, a street she never does find. In attempting to trace her inner map onto the map of the city, she revisits in her mind a night spent walking and talking with a university friend whom she never saw again after the coup, a poignant reminder of Malagrino's grandfather's other admonition,

"that in telling our histories, the important things are not only what you remember, but what you cannot forget."

Abdelrahman Munif has written that the exile writer

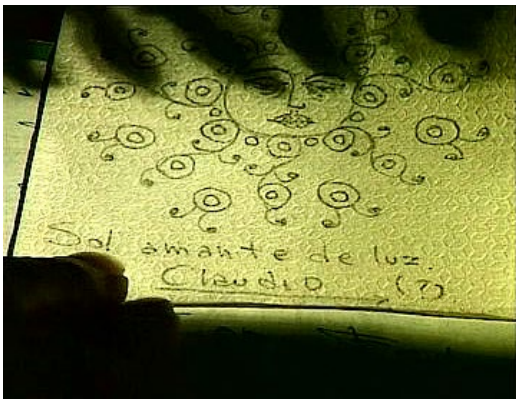
"can spend too much time trying to reconstruct the details of his country as he remembers it." (110)

Malagrino immediately acknowledges the impossibility of such a reconstruction. Further, she understands that memory can be inaccurate and "home" may not be tangible. Influenced by Chris Marker's ruminations on time and memory in *Sans Soleil* (1983), she looks at the city, the outside world, in order to address inner questions. Malagrino wants to use the camera as she perceives Marker to do,

"to witness an unfolding event, but to [address] issues that can be located anywhere else, other than the moment of recording" (Malagrino 2008).

Malagrino's camera witnesses Argentina in the 1990s of her return even as the narration recreates the 1970s of her youth and the repressive 1980s of her exile. She must rely on the memory of other Argentines to recreate the history she did not witness. The combination of first-person narration with talking head interviews, archival footage, and sepia-toned subjective images enables the layering of these three moments as well as multiple subjectivities. Expository voice-over narration combines with letters written during the dictatorship, all woven together by contemporary and archival images. While Malagrino's voice reads the narration, the letters she reads in first-person were written to her by a friend who remained in Argentina, writer and co-producer Monica Flores Correa. The result is what Malagrino calls an outsider-insider perspective





“Following the sun or perhaps searching for an answer to that question mark in parentheses, Claudio traveled to Peru.”



“At my mother’s house that first night back in Buenos Aires....



...I asked her to reenact an old family tradition. ...

— a complex tapestry in which past and present co-exist, coloring Malagrino’s identity as an exiled Argentine, forever conscious of the past she escaped.

From its deeply personal beginning, the film moves through archival North American newsreels to a series of interviews with witnesses to the March, 1976, military coup. In order to provide a multi-focal subjectivity, Malagrino interviews various witnesses:

- Robert J. Cox, former editor-in-chief of the *Buenos Aires Herald*, who risked his life to report about the disappeared;
- Vicente Massot, president of *La Nueva Provincia*, an Argentine newspaper which supported the coup;
- General (retired) Ramón Genaro Díaz Bessone, who remains convinced that the disappearances were a necessary part of war;
- Madres and Abuelas de la Plaza del Mayo and their attorney Alcira Ríos;
- the writer Alicia Partnoy, who survived and testified about the concentration camps;
- Esteban Santamaria, the son of a disappeared/assassinated activist.

From this first set of interviews, the film returns to Malagrino’s personal ruminations about the era. Alternating between first-person narration and the documentary footage, the timeline progresses from the coup to the rise of resistance staged by the Madres and international recognition of human rights violations to the return of constitutional rule in 1983 and the “truth trials” of the mid-nineties. In this way, the film connects individuals and institutions to the catastrophic events of *La Guerra Sucia*, the dirty war waged by the military regime against the people of Argentina.

Malagrino cannot escape the politics that led to her exile. Completed over a period of roughly five to seven years, *Burnt Oranges* did not originally pretend to a 360-degree view. Malagrino and Correa were inspired to collaborate on the film during a 1995 visit in New York City when Correa’s fax machine began buzzing with reports of Argentine Navy Captain Adolfo Francisco Scilingo’s admissions of crimes committed during the dictatorship. The events of 9/11/2001 stopped the process as Correa, who lives in New York City, and Malagrino absorbed “the enormity of the event.” Eventually, they decided that they had to give a full-circle view in order to “reconsider the big question of [global] terrorism” through the lens of state terrorism (Malagrino 2008). It was at this point that Malagrino interviewed Robert Cox and General Díaz Bessone. The events of 9/11 thus evolved the film from a deeply personal piece to a personal film that seeks to represent all sides of the story.

Nonetheless, the interviews with Díaz Bessone and his wife seem ironic. He states that he was just doing what he was told to do for his country. He admits to a far lower number of disappeared than is commonly



... It was then that I began to remember more clearly the long nights of winter when I was a child ...



... and my grandfather cooking oranges for dessert ...



... 'Telling our history,' he would say, 'The important things are not only what you remember, but what you cannot forget.'"

accepted. His wife shares scrapbooks. His deeply-felt nationalism seems, to a liberal viewer, both naïve and beyond the pale. In his unwillingness to admit guilt or wrongdoing, he echoes eerily and nearly word for word the confession of Scilingo in 1995. At that time Scilingo said,

"I would be a hypocrite if I said that I am repentant for what I did. I don't repent because I am convinced that I was acting under orders and that we were fighting a war" (Sims 1995).

Both Díaz Bessone and Scilingo refute the more-commonly understood truth, immortalized by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which called the disappearances

"a true form of torture for the victim's family and friends, because of the uncertainty they experience as to the fate of the victim and because they feel powerless to provide legal, moral, and material assistance" (in Wright 108).

Further, the inclusion of Díaz Bessone makes clear the generation gap between persecutors and most of the disappeared. As Malagrino told me,

"Most of the people who were tortured, murdered, and disappeared were young people" (Malagrino 2008).

Most viewers will be familiar with the Madres and Abuelas de la Plaza del Mayo who have for years sought the truth behind their children's disappearances. Now we must face that the perpetrators of the crimes were also parents of the missing generation. Despite Malagrino's intellectual attempt at objectivity, the juxtaposition of voices — families of victims, victimizers, journalists — conveys a cause-and-effect narrative in which the general cannot escape culpability. Even Malagrino's framing of the General, dressed in his Sunday best, seated in a beautifully appointed room, contrasts with the more casual settings of her other interviews, implicating him through studied contrast with the other witnesses.

What ultimately comes through is Díaz Bessone's fear, a phenomenon discussed also by his wife and the journalist Massot. Malagrino says,

"We made a point to include that because [fear] was a big phenomenon. The fear of being hurt and the fear of losing power. And the fear they inflicted in the population. It was a reign of fear" (Malagrino 2008).

As historian Thomas C. Wright notes,

"Although the disappearances peaked in 1976-1977, the intense terror they produced remained. The military had deliberately created a climate of extreme fear in order to secure and extend its control" (115).

In light of 9/11, Malagrino adds, it was imperative to include the fear because

"that is what terrorism is, the infliction of fear, of terror" (Malagrino 2008).

Implicitly connecting the fear inflicted on a people by its own government with the fear inflicted on the U.S., and the world, by terrorist groups, Malagrino emotionally drives home the corrosive effect such a deep-seated fear has on the fabric of society.

Letters from her university friends bear the weight of most of Malagrino's memory, weaving her absence into the presence of those who remained. The letters allow Malagrino to discuss the difficulty of staying in touch over the years, their code name for censorship, and the danger that pervaded their lives. As Naficy has observed,

"The very fact of addressing someone in an epistle creates an illusion of presence that transforms the address from an absent figure into a presence, which hovers in the texts interstices" (Naficy "Accented Cinema" 105).

Malagrino understands this in a visceral way, discussing the spaces between the wide, curving lines of Claudio's letters. We understand the danger that "this or any" correspondence might have created as she talks about censorship, fear, and disappearances. The letters go beyond what Naficy has called

"the expression and inscription of exilic displacement, split subjectivity and multifocalism" (Naficy "Accented Cinema" 105).

As Janina Ciezadlo observes, they fuse poetry and politics in a manner that draws on Latin American literary tradition. They demonstrate Malagrino and Correa's political engagement with the history as it unfolded. Ciezadlo notes,

"[Malagrino] has learned the lesson of Argentina well, she is not searching for a restoration of order" (47).

Knowing that she cannot go "home" because the Argentina she left no longer exists, Malagrino seeks instead to portray the details of an Argentine reality in which nothing is more important than political memory, individual action, and responsibility to a collective identity.

Part of Malagrino's Argentine reality is her life in the United States. A full professor in the Department of Art and Architecture at University of Illinois-Chicago, Malagrino has two "homes" and her film speaks to both. To that end, there are two versions of the film, one in which she speaks her voice-over in English, the other in Spanish. Logistically, the choice to create two versions was economic. It allows the film to be screened to English-speaking or Spanish-speaking audiences without requiring extensive subtitling in either language. Textually, it allows Malagrino "to speak [her] voice" regardless of the screening venue (2008). Philosophically, the existence of two versions acknowledges, as Malagrino has noted,

"the question of losing your own language as well as gaining a new language from which you can speak" (2008).

While Malagrino is discussing learning to speak English, through *Burnt Oranges* we understand that in exile she lost her language in an even more traumatic way, through censorship and non-delivery of letters

between herself, Correa, and other friends. Moreover, she lost her voice in the unfolding history—unable to bear first-person witness or to participate. In fleeing, she muted herself. In making *Burnt Oranges*, she seeks to insert herself once again in the life of her homeland, both its present and its past.

Malagrino intends for her film to become part of the telling of the story; she wants her viewers to remember the disappeared as individuals in order to understand the magnitude of the atrocities of La Guerra Sucia. In this way her work connects to the fundamental understanding in Latin American women's film and videomaking that

“both the process of telling and the process of experiencing the telling serve to build a collective identity and self-awareness” (Goldman 241).

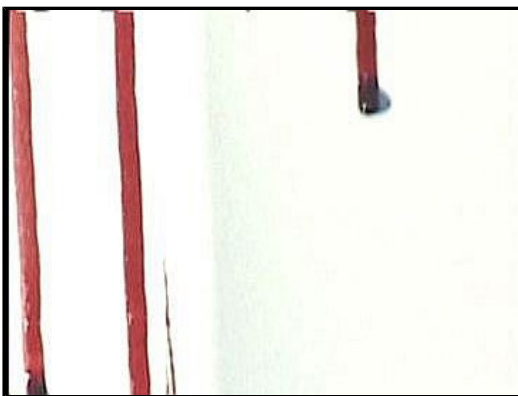
She has shown the film in the United States on university campuses and in human rights contexts, reaching audiences that sometimes know nothing about this history. More poignantly, perhaps, Malagrino showed the film in Buenos Aires in the summer of 2007. She observed,

“it was emotionally excruciating for people in the audience, too, because they relived memory in a very visceral, physical way” (Malagrino 2008).

The presence in the audience of Esteban, one of Malagrino's interviewees, and the family of her friend Claudio created for the audience a cathartic effect, allowing many of them, including Malagrino's mother, to speak of events long-suppressed (Malagrino 2008).

In the end, she admits that she cannot come to terms with “Claudio's loss and the legacy of terror,” but that she has come to admire a new legacy of courage and capacity that she discovered in the Argentina to which she returned. In a final narration, she ruminates on her lifelong friendship with Monica Correa, the tú, while the camera lingers on an image of Claudio's letters, his absence evoking all the film has sought to communicate. The ritual of the burnt orange is the metaphor that allows Malagrino to go “home” again. Having her mother reenact the burning of an orange on a gas stove conjures her personal memories of winter in Buenos Aires, inscribing her within the history she seeks to (re)discover. For the viewer, as Ciezadlo describes,

“burning oranges over a gas stove provides a complex, sensual symbol of family, Argentine identity, nourishment, taste, smell, and transformation, contrasting with the rhetorical discourse of the various authorities and bystanders” (Ciezadlo 47).

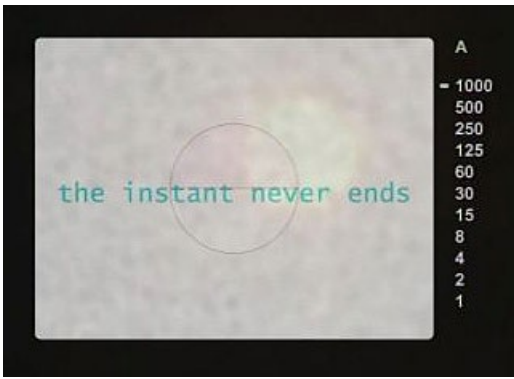


“The Stream of Life”

## Video impressionism: *The Stream of Life*

In another context burning oranges, bleeding dark juices through their blistered skins, evoke the pain of remembering these cozy nights at home in Buenos Aires. This pain as well as the exquisite joy of memory underlies the images in Malagrino's 2005 video installation *The Stream of Life*. From her earliest photographic exhibitions and video





"The Instant Never Ends"



"La palabra es mi cuarta dimension"  
(The word is my fourth dimension.)



Banner of the disappeared. On this banner are printed photographs and details of all the known disappeared, victims of the 1976-1983 dictatorship in Argentina. The banner is unfurled for a memorial march.

installations, Malagrino has incorporated memory, as she says,

"not just as a personal thing [rather] as a force pinching your nerves, cutting through your skin, you feel like there is something there but you don't know exactly what it is. It has to do with the body, it is a visceral feeling" (2007).

*The Stream of Life* was inspired by Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector's biographical novel *Agua Viva* (translated in English as *The Stream of Life*), and Malagrino quote her in lines like, "It is such a Hallelujah," "the instant never ends," "the word is my forth dimension." Noting also the influence of Hélène Cixous, "about recreating a language just to challenge the voice," Malagrino has created many works that focus on the embodiment of fear, violence, war, and memory. Specifically, *The Stream of Life*, a 3:53 minute video intended to be looped in an installation, utilizes much of the atmospheric footage from *Burnt Oranges* to elicit a physical and emotional response. Where *Burnt Oranges* seeks to explain Argentina's past and document Malagrino's search for "home," *The Stream of Life* attempts to recreate in the viewer the physicality of this past. Embodying the history, Malagrino makes it intensely individual, exploring the personal autobiography that was interrupted and altered by her exile.

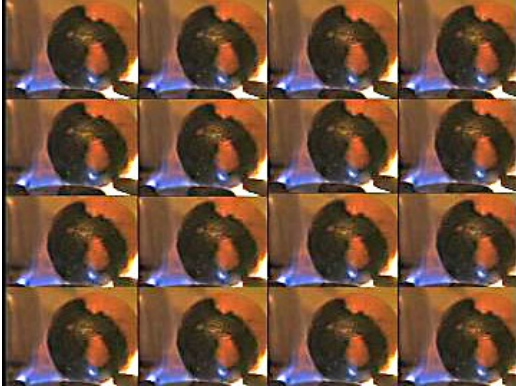
The piece begins with Malagrino's blood (collected during a medical exam) dripping down a stark white background. The words "This is a Hallelujah" flash on screen. The screen changes to an inset of a camera viewfinder, alerting us with text that the image was recorded on 12/24/2005 at midnight. A scroll tells us that

"the instant never ends."

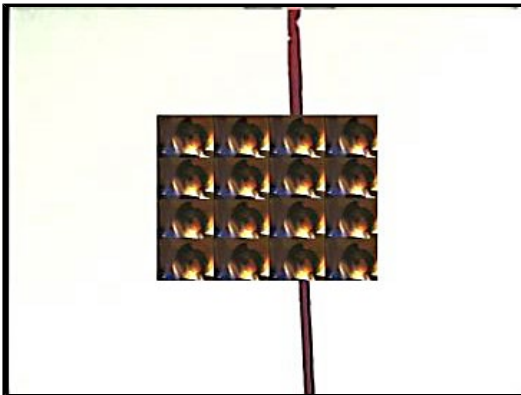
Quickly following are sped-up images whizzing us through Buenos Aires, lingering momentarily on women practicing Tai Chi in a park, and then continuing through the streets and buildings of the city. These images melt into words flashing across the screen, layered with x-rays of Malagrino's body; finally pausing to announce that

"La palabra es mi cuarta dimension" (The word is my fourth dimension).

More actuality images follow, intercut with Argentines marching with a banner on which photographs of the disappeared are printed. And then, the image of an orange burning on a gas range. The burning orange is shown singularly, then in a grid of sixteen identical images, followed by Malagrino's mother placing the orange on the blue fire of the range. As the fruit burns, its juices drip darkly, echoing the blood with which the piece began. The film returns to a montage of the city, this time lingering on elderly Porteños dancing tango in a park before returning to the images of the burning orange superimposed on the image of the dripping blood, reversing its path back through x-rays, text, the inset camera viewfinder, and, finally, a reminder that "the instant never ends."



A burning orange multiplied by sixteen — evoking memories of youthful winters in Buenos Aires, memories that layer on top of other remembered and forgotten moments.



The ritual of the burning orange helps Malgrino search her inner self for the answers she seeks regarding the history she has lived and the history she has missed.

We are forced to ask what is a “Hallelujah”? And, what instant never ends? Is the blood the blessing or praise? Streaming blood lets us know that we are still alive, the pain forcing us to recognize our humanity. Malgrino’s video acknowledges Buenos Aires’ “never-ending instant,” the continuation of its life despite her absence and in the face of state terrorism. Locating the images on Christmas Eve asks us to consider the miracle of faith in the face of hardship. In her images of anonymous Porteños we discover a feeling of the city, a sense of its energy and vitality. We cannot, and perhaps do not need to, identify locations or people. Malgrino’s “stream of life” is an impression of the city and her deep need to connect with it. She illustrates Munif’s assertion that

“Country is not an objective fact, but an ephemeral idea—an ever-shifting memory of the past and dream of the future” (110).

With *The Stream of Life*, Malgrino makes visible the unseeable through the inclusion of her x-rays. These images metaphorically access Malgrino’s feelings of being an “insider looking in from the outside,” or an “outsider looking in” (2008). They also remind us how deeply Malgrino must look within herself to make sense of her lost Argentine time. She has tried to explore the cultural and personal wounds created by her exile and by her country’s tortured history. But, like Galeano in the epigraph, she cannot measure the loss or damage inflicted by Argentina’s military government nor how her own consciousness might have been different had she stayed. However, she can learn, and teach, love of place and the role of memory in defining identity. Three decades after fleeing her homeland, Malgrino creates a poetic homage to Buenos Aires, a place that still resonates for her as “home” despite her long absence. If a viewer has not seen *Burnt Oranges*, *The Stream of Life* conveys that love of place and a desire to belong. And, if one recognizes the footage from *Burnt Oranges*, the layers of meaning are profoundly deeper as these images evoke the history told in the documentary even while eliciting an emotional response.

## Never-ending instant: going home

Through *Burnt Oranges*, Malgrino has tried to prevent forgetting, both her own and ours. The terror of disappearances lay in the erasure of the victims from public record and the subsequent attempt by officials to cover up all traces of their crimes. Malgrino attempts to reconstruct the history to combat dilution of memory. In this way her films continue the Argentine ideal of preservation, a necessity stemming from the reality that that Argentine native people disappeared completely after the land was conquered by the Spanish (Ortiz, 119).

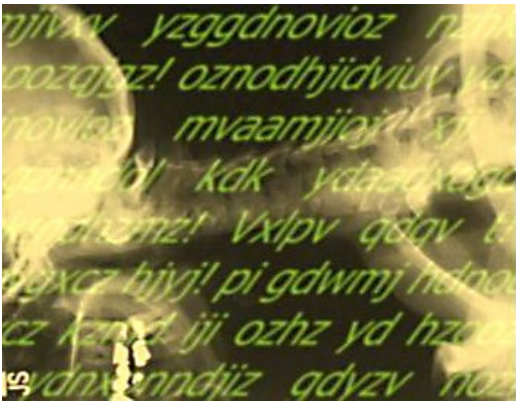
As Abdelrahmin Munif has written,

“The truth is that most people never discover their country in the true sense of the word until they lose it or are forced out.”

Malgrino discovered one truth about her country in the 1970s; it was an ugly, frightening truth from which many of her peers and friends were unable to escape. Decades later she seeks to reconcile that truth with



Buenos Aires today — women practicing Tai Chi in a park.



Malagrino's x-ray — her literal inner self.

Argentina's present and with her heart—she longs to find “home” again in Argentina. To do so, she must navigate historical fact, personal memory, nostalgia, and absence. We understand implicitly that the home Malagrino seeks is within herself, her friends and family, and her memories. Her inner map may not be able to locate the street of the orange trees, but it has unfailingly brought her home. Through her we remember that our home can be, to paraphrase Naficy, any place because we carry it in our memory and recreate it in our acts of imagination (Naficy “Home, House” 6).

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

[1] A few acknowledgments are necessary: To Silvia Malagrino for her generosity of spirit and friendship. In addition to sharing her work with me, Silvia spared hours of her time for interviews, emails, and follow up. To Louis Takacs, International Documents Librarian at Northwestern University, for his assistance with data on Argentine immigration. To Tamara Falicov, María de los Angeles Torres, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage for their intellectual support and critical insights. And, to Philippe Geyskens for his technical support; my interviews would have been impossible without a new MP3 recorder and his computer expertise. Parts of this essay were originally presented at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies meeting in Philadelphia, March 2008. Many thanks to the audience members who provided valuable feedback. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

[2] According to the *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* nearly 22,000 Argentines immigrated to the United States between 1976 and 1984, the years of the Argentine dictatorship. Because of the relationship between Argentina and the U.S., most of these immigrants were not recognized as political refugees or as asylum seekers. Malagrino, for instance, entered the U.S. as a student and would likely not have been recognized for the political refugee that she felt herself to be.

[3] “The Stream of Life,” one channel digital video projection in a loop, was first installed in the Florence Biennale of International Contemporary Art at the Fortezza da Basso, Florence, Italy, December 3 to 11, 2005. It won the First Price Lorenzo il Magnifico Award in New Media.

### Works cited

Aufderheide, Patricia. “Public Intimacy: The Development of the First-Person Video Documentary.” *AfterImage* vol 25 issue 1 (1997): 16-18. Accessed and paginated via Gale Academic OneFile, <http://find.galegroup.com/turing.library.northwestern.edu/itx/start.do?prodId=AONE>.

*Burnt Oranges*. Dir. Silvia Malagrino. 2005. 90 minutes. DVD.

Cie zadlo, Janina. “History and Memory: Burnt Oranges by Silvia



Malagrino." *AfterImage*. vol, 33 no. 4 (January/February, 2006) 46-68.

Galeano, Eduardo. "The Dictatorship and Its Aftermath: The Secret Wounds." Mariani, Philomena, ed. *Critical Fictions: The politics of Imaginative Writing*. Seattle, W.A.: Bay Press, 1991: 254-258.

Goldman, Ilene S. "Latin American Women's Film and Videomaking: The Case of Cine Mujer, Bogotá, Colombia." Noriega, Chon A. (Editor). *Visible Nation: Latin American Cinema and Video*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Malagrino, Silvia. Personal Interview. Chicago, IL. January 24, 2008.

Malagrino, Silvia. Personal Interview. Chicago, IL. October 10, 2007.

Munif, Abdelrahman. "Exile and the Writer." Mariani, Philomena, ed. *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing*. Seattle, W.A.: Bay Press, 1991: 108-111.

Naficy, Hamid, ed.. *Home, House, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*. NY: Routledge, 1999.

Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Ortiz, Alicia Dujovne. "Buenos Aires." Mariani, Philomena, ed. *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing*. Seattle, W.A.: Bay Press, 1991: 115-130.

Sims, Calvin. "Argentine Tells of Dumping 'Dirty War' Captives into Sea." *New York Times*. March 13, 1995.

"Stream of Life." Dir. Silvia Malagrino. Originally installed at the Florence Biennale of International Contemporary Art at the Fortezza da Basso, Florence, Italy, December 3 to 11, 2005. One channel digital video projection. 3:53 minutes. Viewed on DVD.

U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service. *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*. 1985.

Wright, Thomas C. *State Terrorism in Latin America*. Lanham, M.D.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### No parking between signs: on Sadie Benning's *Flat is Beautiful* and early works

by [Burlin Barr](#)

"I start to feel more different now — even in this room with 800 million other faces." — from *If Every Girl had a Diary*

Most of the videos feature a combination of voice and written text. Here, three stills, from *Living Inside* that form part of the phrase "My neighbor is selling crack."



The camera slowly pans across these words.

Of the many works that experimental film and video artist Sadie Benning completed during the 1990s, *Flat is Beautiful* [1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] certainly is the most ambitious and sustained. Like Benning's shorter, earlier works, *Flat is Beautiful* offers a remarkable and multi-layered depiction of interior life, dealing with private fantasy as well as life inside the home. In fact, much of the video takes place in the bedroom of the principle character, Taylor, a youth of eleven or twelve years of age. Benning shot many of her early video works in her own bedroom, lending them an air of both comfortable protection and oppressive entrapment. These qualities certainly pervade *Flat is Beautiful*, as Taylor, poised between childhood and adolescence, tries to make sense of the conflicts between myriad desires — socially prescribed ones as well as those arising from Taylor's own psycho-sexual biography. The line between these two realms is, of course, fraught, changing, and uncertain, and Benning portrays this world of queer (or not) adolescence with all the richness and originality that Douglas Sirk brought to his depictions of ambivalence and forbidden desire in the melodramas of the 50s.

In this essay I discuss *Flat is Beautiful* in the context of Benning's earlier video works — a complete listing of which is appended to this essay. By looking at the video in the context of Benning's other works, I survey some of the methods, motifs, and videographic textures that extend throughout these fascinating and rich videos. All of the earlier works are short forms (between 6 and 20 minutes in length), and they share a highly confessional, diaristic, and often emotionally raw quality, as they feature Benning speaking to and performing for the camera in a variety of ways. The earlier videos combine voice-over with the presentation of handwritten script, creating a sense of dialogue or multi-vocality within a divided or conflicted persona. The voice's immediacy works in counterpoint with the handwritten text, which is visually assembled at a slow pace as the camera pans across the words.



The text is usually handwritten and remains part of the environment that Benning is rendering.



This still from *Jollies* shows the window in the background, even as the text scrolls past.



*Jollies* also includes text ....



... written on money.



*Jollies*.



*A Place Called Lovely* includes writing on a transparent surface that allows ...



...the environment or, in this case, the face to be viewed as part of the text.

In visual terms, these early video works are filled with simple artifacts and detritus from everyday life, as Benning presents and manipulates household objects, toys, and printed materials. Benning effectively transforms these objects into simple installations or works them into brief performances that play off of her spoken and written musings in both direct and indirect ways. Music plays a similar role, as it comments and expands on moods, ideas, or concepts that have emerged in Benning's spoken or written texts. Several of the works, especially *It wasn't Love*, feature elaborate musical soundtracks that all but dominate the tone of the work. In summary, these videos combine voice, writing, elements of mise-en-scene, and music to create short film poems or diaristic expressions.

For the most part, these works were shot with a Fisher Price Pixelvision toy camera, which recorded images and sounds onto audio cassettes (Benning's three later videos — including *Flat is Beautiful* — contain footage shot in 16mm film as well). The quality of image produced by the Fisher Price camera (due to



Benning's videos are populated with objects that help her to render her surroundings or that comment on or act out ideas presented in voice-over and written text.



The dolls from *Jollies* allow Benning to express and to act out forbidden lesbian desire.

both the simplicity of the lens and the medium of recording) is both coarse and pixilated (hence the name), yet Benning uses this "limit" to great effect in depicting the private and personal life of an adolescent or young adult. Images shot with this toy camera appear very "near-sighted"; correspondingly, Benning creates a visual world that hovers between intimate closeness and a visual narrowness bordering on myopia. Yet, this nearsightedness is not one of intolerance (in fact, most of the videos launch polemics against social and sexual intolerance — a result of Benning's perception of her own social liminality). Rather, the exploration of a girl's private world helps to render the multiple dynamics of emergence and/or inwardness that so inform adolescent and young adult life. These works are rife with examples of emergence:

- sexual emergence,
- discoveries about one's own psychology,
- a relish in the promise and newness of meta-discourse and self-referentiality (these works persistently question and refer to themselves).

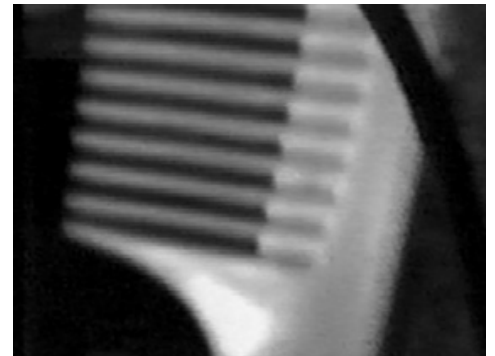
*Flat is Beautiful* is almost entirely devoted to a presentation of Taylor (the tape's main character) as an emergent subject: as someone attempting to come to terms with him/herself in a world of racial, class, and sexual prescriptions and prohibitions.

In summary, spectators of these videos are asked to engage with them in a variety of ways:

- to apprehend materials in different modes (both aural and written);
- to navigate starkly contrasting visual textures;
- to attend to resonances of popular culture in the form of music and newsprint;
- to respond to a combination of ironic artifice and earnest confession; and finally
- to alternate between registers of playfulness and seriousness presented through monologue, vignette, and animation.



The toy car from *It Wasn't Love* takes Benning and her lover to Detroit.



The comb, to name one of many common objects, is wonderfully unexpected in *If Every Girl had a Diary*.



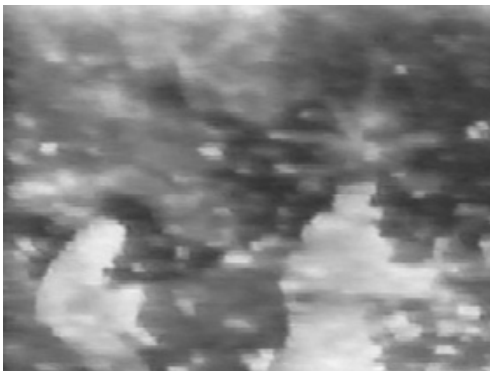


These two images from *A Place Called Lovely* illustrate how the world of mass culture ...



... in the form of sexual stereotypes and societal violence enters Benning's private space.

## "Crawling the walls": finding a voice in the early videos



The snow globe from *A New Year* provides one example of how Benning

"I've been waiting for that day to come when I can walk the streets. People would look at me and say. That's a dyke. If they didn't like it, they'd fall into the center of the earth and deal with themselves." — from *If Every Girl Had a Diary*

"The world outside my bedroom window was brutal and needy." — from *Girlpower*

At one point in her fourth video, *If Every Girl Had a Diary*, Benning casually states "It's only been a year ago that I crawled the walls." As stated earlier, the private space that Benning renders frequently assumes claustrophobic and oppressive qualities — reinforced by the depthlessness of the pixelvision image and the persistent use of extreme close ups.

Her first video, *A New Year*, briefly features images of a snow globe as it is shaken up and the simulated snow flurry encircles the two figures housed in the

uses simple objects that work in counterpoint with ideas and motifs in the video. The snow globe is a self-enclosed world that references both entrapment and a fantasy world to escape into.



All of the videos use extreme close ups of the body, especially the face. These two images of the eye from *Me and Ruby Fruit* and *It Wasn't Love* are representative of images from many of the early videos.



The extreme close ups tend to draw attention to a sensory relation with—or basic orientation toward—one's surroundings, creating an often haptic quality in the videos.

tiny sphere. It is a compelling image and perfectly illustrates how Benning uses simple objects and elements of mise-en scene to great effect as the object resonates with other ideas and motifs in the video. At times this resonance can be straightforward as it simply reinforces a stated (or implied) idea or feeling. At other times these elements of mise-en scene become supercharged with meaning. In this case, the snow globe is an isolated chamber that resonates strongly with the sense of entrapment and domestic confinement, but it carries other overtones as well. It also resembles an ideal setting, a protected fantasy space — a space to escape into. The text of the video (there's no spoken voice in this work, only a very spare handwritten script) certainly references two poles of experience — public and private — and both poles appear to be simultaneously overwhelming and confining. The script below constitutes the majority of the handwritten text, and brief as it is, it unfolds (in conjunction with numerous images) over 4-5 minutes of the video:

"I realized how crazy everyone is, and  
I realized what a small part I play in it.

A girl I know got hit by a drunk driver.  
Her leg was broken and twisted like puddy.  
It would be so easy to die.

A friend of mine got raped by a black man  
Now she's a nazi racist skinhead.

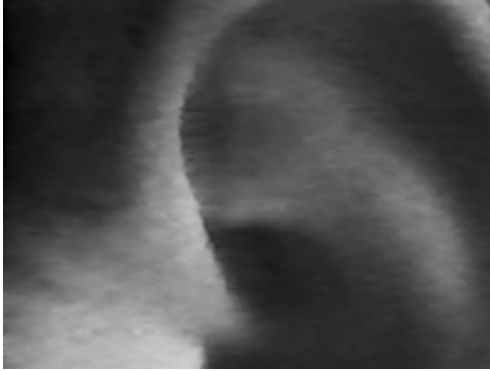
You're easily trapped when you have an excuse.

My neighbor is selling crack  
as my neighborhood dies dies."

This brief text invokes, first of all, a broad public sphere ("I realized what a small part I play in it"), a neighborhood, as well as an unelaborated sense of the local — which also is a space of violence, sexual violence, and racism. Yet, the video "takes place," so to speak, in the privacy of Benning's bedroom, where she encounters an outside by means of a television (which is screening a game show at the beginning of the video) and newsprint. In this first tape, then, we are introduced to what remains perhaps the most important and persistent quality of Benning's works. Pervasive throughout her works, she emphasizes the rendering a strong sense of milieu.

The settings or milieus don't just provide a context for narrative action; they are the tapes' primary material. From the bedroom, to the shared family space, to the schoolyard, to parking lots and porches, to fantasized spaces, to named cities, to a larger and more generalized public sphere, Benning painstakingly presents these spheres of activity and ponders her (or her characters') place in them. The videos centrally concern the question of orientation in these physical spaces, social spheres, and psycho-social terrains. Although most spectators correctly recognize Benning's videos as exemplary meditations on the subject of sexual orientation, I maintain that the videos together concern multiple orientations of identification and desire. They present these multiple orientations as a dynamic process and an ongoing work, rather than a fixed state that one discovers and then lives.

I take up this point more extensively below when I more closely examine *Flat is Beautiful*, yet the problem of orientation is present from the first moment of the first video. Through the use of pervasive extreme close ups, the video places a pronounced visual emphasis on eye, ear, nose, mouth (teeth, lips, and tongue) and hands, thereby calling attention to a basic sensory interaction with the environment.



These images of an ear ...



... mouth, teeth, lips and nose are from *Me and Ruby Fruit*, .....

*A Place Called Lovely*, and *Jollies*. Similar images appear in other videos



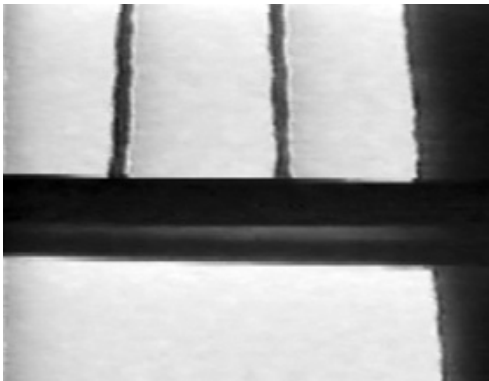
Although all of the videos use extreme close ups, starting with the fourth video, *If Every Girl had a Diary*, Benning has more sustained images of face and body.

In these stills of Benning's face from *It wasn't Love*, it's clear that the videography is less claustrophobic and the works offer a much more elaborated persona.

The camera is often uncannily close to its subject. Glimpses of an entire face are either non-existent, or both brief and rare in the early videos (there is no sustained shot of an entire face until the fourth video). The early tapes especially tend to eschew the creation and centrality of narrative or character. Rather, they offer a montage of image and sound that presents an often richly layered environment, consisting not only of clearly identifiable objects but also



Windows feature prominently throughout the videos. These two images from *Living Inside* show the window as little more than an aperture or a brilliance.



The windows dually reference a sense of entrapment and the possibility of escape.

presenting more abstractly texture, sound, shape, and light. These videos are emphatically made in a lyric mode with their presentation of an "I" or quite literally an "eye" (a frequently repeated image) — a thinking, feeling, reacting subject — present in a dynamic space. Many of the sequences which crosscut between the body and the environment create an intensely haptic effect, and the foregrounding especially of the visual and tactile senses places the spectator at times in an almost infantile position — with attention directed to texture, light, and shape. In this regard, the videos focus on orientation and disorientation in a physical space. Questions of social and psychological orientation follow.

There are other recurrent motifs (be they acoustic, visual, or conceptual) that extend throughout the works, from the earliest videos (created when Benning was 15 or 16 years old) to *Flat is Beautiful* (completed a decade later). Windows, for example, appear in almost every work and to different ends. In the earlier videos, the window appears as little more than a rectangular aperture: a brilliance; a white shape surrounded in darkness, identifiable as a window but also appearing as a strong sensory and graphic element. In these early videos, the window, appropriately, operates in a profoundly liminal space, assuming both semiotic and sensory value. It frequently reads as a longing for escape, as a yearning for an outside, but it also seems to anchor a closed and confined space with brightness. The windows pull toward the within and the without. If, in the early works (such as *A New Year* or *Living Inside*), the window works solely as an aperture, in later videos we actually see past the window and focus on objects in the exterior world.



This image from *If Every Girl had a Diary* shows the window as part of Benning's environment.



The window in *Flat is Beautiful*: Here, as in several of the later videos, the window is not as confining and seems to open onto a broader world.

This movement from inner to outer is facilitated through other aspects of the video works as well. The first four tapes (though they mention different individuals) are entirely in the first person — signaled by voice-over or hand-scrawled text which the camera pans across. Even the written text — appearing on school notepads, money, or sometimes a transparent sheet suspended in the room — remains part of the environment and linked to the body, and text never assumes a non-diegetic, exterior, and privileged space as is often the case with intertitles. Later videos are in first person but often dwell at length on another's presence: *A Place called Lovely*, for example, concerns a bullying acquaintance named Ricky Lugo, and *It wasn't Love* involves a liaison with an unnamed woman. Only with *Judy Spots* (1995) and *Flat is Beautiful* is there a categorical shift to third person, in which a fully-formed character replaces the "I" that so dominates the earlier films. Benning's fourth video, *If Every Girl Had a Diary* continues the highly personal and confessional mode established in the first



videos, but there is a new self-awareness present here — evident in the title itself, which refers to a sense of comfort and empowerment in finding one's voice. At one point in video, she states,

"I guess to be alone is to know yourself for you and not who you're with; and I like that."

Here Benning is being less reactive and more reflective — expressing a level of comfort in her own mind. Through the course of these videos, Benning as well as her characters (as she slowly shifts from diaristic to fictional modes) begin to express increased comfort, and even pleasure, in their own minds, with their bodies, and as part of a social body.



... blissful physicality from *It wasn't Love*.

Images of companionship and...

*It wasn't Love* begins with a unambiguously blissful sequence in which two young women stand before the camera — embracing and dancing. This work clearly concerns two individuals and their bond rather than a single lyric speaker. In telling the story of an unsanctioned attraction, it begins to demystify and deconstruct master narratives about love and desire, even as it is utterly devoted to a narrative about love and desire. The video, moreover, shows Benning comfortably and playfully performing different gendered roles. A phenomenal sequence from *It wasn't Love* perfectly combines the almost infantile near-sightedness of many of the early videos with a broader field of experience. The narrator states that the two young women "make out" in the parking lot of a fried chicken restaurant. The visual sequence that accompanies

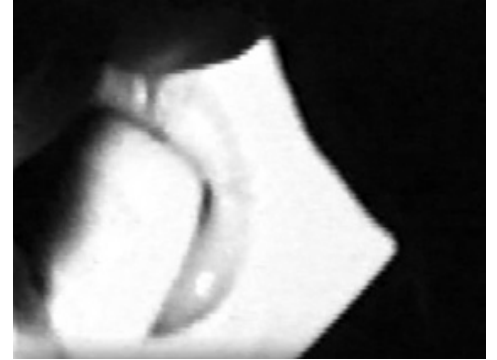


the scene of kissing involves extreme close-ups of Benning sucking her thumb with the lens of the camera cupped in the palm, very close to Benning's mouth. It is a both disorienting and erotic sequence that dually refers to an infantile oral pleasure and adult sexuality. With *Flat is Beautiful*, Benning dwells at greater length on the transitional and liminal moment of adolescence, as we see Taylor becoming more comfortable and more confident in her/his mind and body.

Two stills from *It wasn't Love* show Benning as femme...



... and butch. In this video Benning comfortably and playfully takes on a variety of gendered performances.



The make out scene in the fried chicken restaurant from *It wasn't Love*. The video juxtaposes an almost infantile orality with a more mature, emergent sexuality.

[Go to page 2](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### *Flat is Beautiful: signs, texts, bodies*



The mask is the most prominent and original feature of *Flat is Beautiful's* mise-en-scene. These two stills show children on the playground outside of Taylor's school.



The mask calls attention to identity's constructed nature and provisionality.

"It was at school, with my father, and in my own culture, that I felt most alone." — from *Girlpower*

Orientation in one's own changing body, one's mental world, and one's social body lies at the heart of *Flat is Beautiful*. The video is unique for Benning in that it is presented in the third person and is fictional (Benning's previous film, *Judy Spots*, shares these characteristics, but it is far briefer and less developed). The video relies heavily on actors (her first work to do so), even as it includes animation sequences (these are reserved for scenes of dreaming and day-dreaming), as well as many of Benning's trademark lyrical sequences which render the different environments (interior and exterior) that Taylor exists in. The video is unique among her works in that it renders the lyric immediacy of adolescent experience within a more distanced third person narrative, creating a dialogic text that at once maintains a distance from Taylor's world while also immersing itself closely into the details of Taylor's day-to-day experience. After creating so many video works that document adolescent anxieties with a palpable immediacy, one might wonder why Benning returned to this material a decade later. The fact that *Flat is Beautiful* was made by someone well beyond the adolescence both expands and limits its range. All of the earlier works offer remarkable and fresh examples of self-assertion, which include expressions of angst, anxiety, discomfort, or rebellion. *Flat is Beautiful* offers a candid picture of a stage in a person's development, which might include angst, anxiety, rebellion and discomfort, but the work isn't guided by the expression of those feelings. The video focuses not just on a harsh or sublime immediacy but moves toward an awareness of a person's development and changing experience over time.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the work concerns how Benning deals with the problems that emerge around the use of actors. Throughout the video, Benning uses non-professional actors, all of whom wear large, simple hand-made masks, thereby rendering the face as a graphic image rather than as a biological feature. The use of these masks emphasizes the constructed nature and provisionality of identity, and certainly contributes to the gender ambiguity that pervades the video. From the very opening of the work, we see Taylor circulating in an environment rich with conflicting prescriptions concerning race, class, gender, and sexuality. The presence of the masks immediately links each of these terms with the notion of masquerade, and it renders the notion of identities and orientations as an ongoing negotiation between perceived essences and performances. One scene of the work, for example, shows Quiggy (Taylor's gay housemate) preparing to leave home for the day and grooming in the bathroom, which entails essentially drawing on his face (mask). It is a striking image in that it links the face (one strong locus of identity) with the act of writing or drawing. The face has become text.



Taylor in mask alongside text "Franklin Pierce School." Written text is ubiquitous in the video and is a strong component of Taylor's environment.



Face as text: Quiggy prepares for the day and is shown here grooming (essentially drawing on his mask).



Two images of Quiggy before and ... after he "puts on his hair."

*Flat is Beautiful* presents Taylor as first and foremost circulating in a world of texts. The opening montage presents simultaneously a social and textual world, offering images of children on a playground and showing an environment rich with text in the form of signs, labels, and instructions. One of the first images presents the alphabet in the form of a grid painted onto the asphalted surface of the school playground. This grid calls to mind something akin to a surface for a game of hopscotch, but it also is reminiscent of simple charts which appear in schools for teaching numbers and letters. Much of what follows in the video speaks to a concept perhaps most succinctly phrased by filmmaker Hollis Frampton: that we learn to read in order to read instructions.[2][[open endnotes in new window](#)]



The alphabet as a grid: We learn to read in order to read instructions.

Following this early image of the alphabet are a number of image/text constellations which Taylor passes by on an ordinary, daily walk home from school. This sequence is an example, *par excellence*, of Benning operating in a lyric mode and rendering Taylor's social milieu. The video unambiguously emphasizes these texts, banal as they are. It doesn't emphasize any one more than the others, but presents instead the certainty that they are both plentiful and inescapable. These come in the form primarily of written signs on storefronts, billboards, and buses: Burger King, Cynthia's Hair Care, Jerry's





The environment of signs, text, and guidelines ....



... in Taylor's daily walk home from school.



These stills are all captured from static, "flat" shots.

Auto Body. One sign reads "Hang Tough Milwaukee--we can do it together," while another states, "Bag Groceries for a Living". Upon arriving home, Taylor remains in solitude, and we follow Taylor through a series of regular and somewhat humdrum activities that we can only assume Taylor undertakes everyday: heating up something to eat, watching television, drawing, daydreaming. But here again, Taylor, in the privacy of home, is subject to a barrage of instructions and texts: from microwave oven consoles to food boxes. Mr. Coffee is in full view while Taylor heats up a Hungry Man dinner in which even the food is compartmentalized.

Taylor always is confronting signs and labels that offer advice, imperatives, prohibitions, and instructions: "checks cashed," "pay utility bills here," "no loitering." The world around Taylor — both public and private — is constantly being stabilized through these constellations of text and image, and most of these labels involve some designation of gender. If the hopscotch-like grid holding the alphabet offers a framework of open possibilities, then the video's final image — the façade for the ABC Locksmith — offers just the opposite: a fully interpellated world in which labels and signs are locked severely into place. These two images, which serve as bookends to Benning's work, also reveal the basic terms of Taylor's world — a movement from open possibility, to a social and sexual climate in which terms and identities remain fixed. But, the video also presents us with a figure (Taylor) who creatively resists these categories, and alternately much of the video presents a social world that is strictly trying to maintain its labels, but finding it impossible to do so.

Here, I must admit that it's frankly difficult to offer a summary of these first sequences, because I find myself in need of a pronoun. Taylor is androgynous and facing a crisis of sexuality and gender, and the video has never marked Taylor as male or female. Up to this point, the video has offered a narrative in which sexual difference is not a driver (that in itself is an unusual feat in the cinema — even in experimental works such as Benning's). Importantly though, we have seen gender codes attached to other minor "characters" in the story — be they burger joints, prepared dinners, salons, appliances, or car shops (Burger King, Mr. Coffee, etc). But Taylor's crisis is best exemplified in the following scene, when, just having completed her Hungry Man dinner, s/he gets a call from a friend at school, Julie (with whom Taylor is infatuated):

Julie: Taylor, it's me Julie. your girlfriend (with a slight sarcastic tone)

*long pause*

Julie: That's what everyone is telling me

*pause*

Julie: You're not a boy.

Taylor: What am I then?"

Julie: You're a girl stupid

Taylor: No I'm not

Julie: Then what are you"?

That question ends the conversation, as Taylor nervously kicks his/her foot in silence. To Julie's first assertions about her gender, Taylor responds, "No I'm not," and denies being a girl. But more importantly, Taylor pauses after Julie's final question. Taylor seems to be more comfortable as "not a boy" than as a "girl", and it is as if Taylor is positing, or certainly grasping for, one or more new genders: boy, girl, not a boy, and not a girl.[3]

We are eight minutes into the video when Taylor discovers that she is having her period, and spectators of the work are offered the so-called "stability" of knowing Taylor's sex. Yet, for me as a viewer and for many other viewers of the video,[4] this knowledge comes as a bit of a disappointment — an overt



The emphasis on the mural and ...



... the facade certainly resonates with the "flat" masks worn by the actors.



The video's final image: "ABC Locksmith." Signs and labels are locked severely into place.

narrowing of a heretofore rich and open field of narrative possibilities. I do not mention this as a critique of Benning's work.

On the contrary, with this abrupt narrative turn this video highlights the preponderance of narratives which require an overt stabilization of gender identity and sexual difference. I use the term "narratives" here in its broadest sense, to include not only fictional and non-fictional texts, but also micro-narratives — the kinds of stories affixed to commodities and institutions that guide individuals through their day-to-day activities. So the menses scene comes as a narrative shock that calls attention to extrinsic norms concerning narrative coherence and gender stability. But it also forwards many narrative concerns that Benning has set up in the first minutes of the video. Taylor's response to the discovery signals a sense of alienation from and resigned acceptance of her own body. She holds her head in her hands and says, "I don't know what I'm going to do." The statement resonates in different registers. Is this her first period? Does she not know how to care for herself? Or, after her conversation with Julie in which she denied being a boy, a girl, and a not boy, she now is confronted with an inescapable biology, and her response is one of uncertainty and disappointment. The video then offers a brief montage of the bathroom — the sink, the light switch, the towel rack — as if Taylor, in a state of uncertainty, is taking in her surroundings. Taylor's mother arrives home at this moment and without acknowledging Taylor, she begins watching television and eating junk food, oblivious to anything Taylor may be going through. Taylor then matter-of-factly places a napkin in her underwear (as if it were a familiar activity), mutters "dammit," and after a pause, in an exasperated, impatient, and bothered tone says, "Oh god."

This is not the only scene of bodily awkwardness in the video. A love scene involving Taylor's mother and her new boyfriend is embarrassingly sustained and awkward, as it shows the two clutching and tussling on the couch, pulling apart, and then coming together again (a scene that Taylor appears to act out with dolls at another point in the video). Taylor's gay housemate, Quiggy, expounds at one point on the insufficiency of his physique. These moments in the video affirm that discomfort in the body are not unique to adolescence, but that adolescence is the gateway to a host of conflicting concerns regarding sexuality, body image, and desire. Taylor, as I discuss further below, has her own set of anxieties about bodyimage, as she imagines having or yearns for masculine physical qualities which she does not possess. In *Girlpower*, Benning talks about this dynamic in a more diaristic mode:

"When I was a kid. I took my shirt off, imagining I was just as sexy and as powerful as when Matt Dillon did it for the centerfold of *Teen Beat* magazine. I rode my big wheel down the street pretending I was Eric Estrada, rushing on my motorcycle to save the life of some girl who desperately needed to be rescued."

By shifting into the third person, Benning is able to present unease with the body as part of a broader social discourse and not strictly as an individual psychological state. Taylor's scene of menses presents simultaneously a sense of both surprise, alienation, and familiarity; Taylor's body appears to be hers and not. And this tension is duplicated in the film with other characters and in other scenarios. It plays out especially by use of the masks, as the actors wear oversized, cardboard constructs. The actors (many of which are children) appear to move comfortably in these masks, even as the masks present spectators of the video with a profound effect of alienation. Although the playground scenes involving the children are narratively insignificant (since nothing "happens" in



An idealized image of living space, altered and marked by graffiti. In redefining the notion of home, Benning's video calls attention to the entire surface — capturing together both the original façade and the markings which have accumulated on and refashioned the original.



A dilapidated and inaccessible home: Many such image/text combinations depict histories that have been literally scrawled across different surfaces.



The television's image of love; an image that Taylor ...

those scenes), they do offer an acute awareness of body and they present an unusual combination of both physical gracefulness and awkwardness.

There is one scene of blissful physicality in the video: Quiggy's sexual rendezvous with the mailman. This sexually graphic scene counterpoints the awkwardly amorous scene between Taylor's mother and her boyfriend, and these two scenes are the only examples of adult sexuality in the work. Quiggy's scene conforms to none of the mass-mediated images of sexuality to which Taylor is exposed, whereas the scene with her mother does. These two scenes are also noteworthy in that they both violate the structural logic of the video that is, for the most part, centered on Taylor, and which offers us images, sounds and events that she witnesses. Why present events that Taylor doesn't see? Primarily, it shows how adult behavior (whether in the form of sexual liaisons or of watching television and eating junk food) remains part of Taylor's environment. Although much of the video appears to offer Taylor's point-of-view, it rarely is presented in the structure of a look. Taylor remains a passive witness for much of the work, although there is a prominent shift in roughly the final third, when she expresses impatience and anger with her father and when she seeks out Quiggy to affirm and validate her emergent lesbianism.

In the first half of the video, at the very least, she is a sponge taking in numerous conflicting messages from her environment and she telegraphs these messages even as she is trying to create her own script. The love scene involving her mother (Peggy), isn't witnessed by Taylor, but it is structured into the video so that it is unambiguously folded into Taylor's world:

- Shot 1: From inside Taylor's room looking at and out of the window.
- Shot 2: Peggy and boyfriend on the couch in the adjoining room.
- Shot 3: Taylor playing in her room.
- Shot 4: Peggy and boyfriend on the couch

Taylor occupies a space of subjectivity that lies somewhere between witness and participant. In my reading, the video joins other works (such as Varda's *Cleo from 5 to 7*) that present a transformation in agency. Just as other writers and artists have asked, "what happens when the woman looks," Benning is asking "what happens when the child looks," or when the teenager looks, speaks, and listens?

In the first parts of the video, Taylor frequently is rendered as little more than an ear or an eye — overhearing, witnessing — and not directly addressed unless it is in the form of instruction or with a tone of impatience. For example, she overhears her mother talking on the phone, but her mother rarely speaks to her. This state of liminal subjectivity is sustained in part by the fact that Taylor is the object of various shades of parental neglect. After waking from a nightmare early in the morning, she calls her mother for comfort and companionship, yet her mother's efforts at verbal consolation are infantilizing and clearly do not connect with Taylor. During the course of the video, Taylor has two conversations with her absentee father (who is divorced from Taylor's mother). He likewise, exhibits no understanding of Taylor's personal interests or her developmental period, and simultaneously condescends to her while pretending to speak to her as an adult peer.

Both parents speak to Taylor in a way inappropriate for her age, both worry obsessively about money (further exasperating the intense class-consciousness which combines with the other forms of often paralyzing self-consciousness to



which Taylor is subjected). When Taylor does begin to "look" and "listen" in a new way, it takes the form of acts of resistance and, more importantly, of positive assertion. She rebuts her father, but she also turns to Quiggy for advice. On her own initiative, she speaks with him concerning her attraction for Julie.



... re-draws and re-enacts with marked differences. She adds curves to the woman almost as an afterthought.



Two drawings from an animation sequence that render Taylor's daydreams about Julie. These images completely clash with the televised images of love, although even these ...



... are still suffused with the culture of commodification with which Taylor struggles. Note the 7 Up logo that finds

So Taylor's comment in her telephone conversation with Julie (discussed above) is crucial: she states, "No I'm not." It's the first statement of resistance in the video. Although, the first section of the video strongly emphasizes the fact that Taylor is always reading and always confronted with texts, Benning also foregrounds a number of image/text combinations that propose conflicted or alternate models of reading, that offer broader options for social and sexual identity, and that open the door to subtle acts of resistance. Presented by Benning in the form of static shots of signs, store fronts, or facades, these texts don't exactly say, "No I'm not," but they do reveal cracks, faults, and contradictions in the idealized identities pervasive in mass culture.

Several images, for example, offer starkly conflicted renderings of the notion of "home." One is a mural painted on a public space depicting a domestic interior, and the other is the exterior of a dilapidated house. Taylor passes both of these sites on her daily walk home from school. Both of these sites have been marked. The mural offers an artistic rendering of a living room — it presents an idealized, even fantasized, space that has been marked over by graffiti. The house — inaccessible, boarded up and abandoned — also has been graffitied. Benning's video calls attention to the entire surface in these images — capturing together both the original façade and the markings which have accumulated on and refashioned the original. These transformed surfaces, which reference the notion of "home," are clear analogues to Taylor's own sense of home, which also has been fractured and re-cast. Benning presents us with a large number of such image/text combinations depicting the histories that have been literally scrawled across different surfaces.

The emphasis is on the effect of palimpsest and the creation of a layered and de-centered image. The image of the living room, for example, has not been "defaced" by the graffiti, rather, the "face" has been added to and changed. It's true that the original "ideal of the home" has been eroded, but it becomes clear that that is just the point. These images embody, in very concrete ways, the layered nature of such concepts as "home." And as Taylor tries to feel at home in her own living space and in her own skin, she must undertake a form of archeology to sift through the accretions of feeling and meaning that she is constantly seeing, reading, and responding to. In short, to come to terms with the layered and fluid aspects of her psycho-sexual world, Taylor improvises and plays with various components of her identity and her environment. She constantly marks them, changes them, and places them into unexpected combinations. As Freud writes of child's play, the child

"creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him. . . . he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it."[5]

We witness this sense of play and improvisation in several scenes which feature Taylor alone in her room. We see her daydreaming (dreams which the video screens for us), playing video games, and interacting with dolls and other toys. This sense of play — even play with the very commodified objects which may limit and contain her subjectivity (such as Barbie dolls) — can in fact become a form of resistance or questioning, as she tries out unlikely combinations to test the possibility of taboo relationships and of breaking through prohibitions of race and sexuality.

Her play also expresses ambivalence about subjects she is supposed to be



its way into this fantasy.



Another still from the animated daydream sequence illustrates Taylor's anxiety that she must possess masculine attributes in order to be attractive to Julie.

enthusiastic about. She produces a drawing of two lovers that clearly echo an image she has seen on television, in which gender difference is clearly marked. But in her drawing, she adds almost as an afterthought the curves that bestow femininity on one figure. Another brief and fascinating sequence shows her acting out an exchange between a Barbie doll and a Mr. T action figure. Taylor holds Mr. T and Barbie close together, as if they are locked in a passionate embrace. As the dolls kiss and tussle ( a clear re-enactment of her mother's amorous behavior), she melodramatically voices the following dialogue between them:

"Barbie: Oh I love you.

Mr. T: You're so ugly, how can you do this to me.

Barbie: Because you love me.

Mr. T: No I don't. I hate you. You're so ugly, I can't stand it. Get out of my face now. I have a new love.

Barbie: Darling, who is your new love? Please love me. I don't know what I'd do without you. You have so much more money than me."

It's a strangely conflicted scene in which we see Taylor both at the mercy of and trying to break free from social prescriptions of beauty, attractiveness, femininity, masculinity, race and class. The substitution of the seemingly brutish and black Mr. T for the more socially accepted Ken, the fundamental questioning of Barbie's beauty, the helplessness of Barbie in the face of rejection, and the concern about being self-sufficient all combine to show how Taylor is being pulled contradictory directions.

Her daydreams, which entail fantasies of romantic connection with Julie, reveal similar qualities of clarity, originality, and confusion. One sequence emphasizes classic features of masculinity, such as strong muscles, which Taylor believes she must possess in order for Julie — a girl — to be attracted to her. Taylor, in part, believes she must possess the most highly circulated masculine characteristics — in body and self-presentation — in order to attain her fantasies. But Taylor is surrounded by conflicting models of gender identity, and she seems at least intuitively aware that these stories about masculinity and femininity do not form a coherent whole which one can easily emulate.

Taylor, in fact, has been surrounded with multiple contradictions and almost laughable attempts to stabilize meaning around a set of supposedly shared ideals. This image of a fantasy shining car, follows an image of a much less spectacular, real one, parked beneath a sign reading "Alive with Pleasure." Similarly, an image of a worn-down store front, which advertises European Design, encapsulates a vivid contradiction between — on the one hand — aspirations for upward mobility and good taste, and — on the other hand — social immobility and kitsch. The video is quite relentless in its attempt to show the extraordinary cultural saturation to which Taylor is subjected, and which emphasizes a combination of sexual stability, financial stability, and subsequent happiness. This stability of identity remains, however, a fragile construct, as ephemeral and transparently fabricated as the aforementioned gleaming and cartoonish automobile. These images foreground how cultural and individual fantasies may overlap or radically clash.



Fantasies of social mobility: A cartoonish, idealized car juxtaposed...



... against a much less spectacular real one.



Benning emphasizes a strong visual irony between this harsh environment and the phrase in the previous image, "Alive with pleasure." In a further clash of messages and images, there's ...



... an absence of design in "Euro Design." We see how Taylor tunes in to these clashes and contradictions around her, as she learns that she doesn't have to subscribe to these cultural fantasies.

There are many fantasy spaces in the video, some generated by Taylor, some emerging from mass culture, and some handed down from family and friends. Most emerge from a combination of these sources. This space of fantasy is another important milieu for Taylor, just as important as any of the physical spaces that the video renders. We witness her feeling both safe and uneasy with these fantasies, and also we see her coming to terms with the certainty that some of these fantasies are fraudulent or untenable. In my viewing of the video, I note that the work invites us to look through the cultural fantasies into their ideological underpinnings. Benning already was working in this direction in *A Place Called Lovely*, where she states,

"My grandmother always wanted me to be like one of those sweet little whitegirls, who was some people's dream of what was right in the world. That scared me too."

Benning's dis-ease with a presumably benevolent wish demonstrates a deep suspicion of cultural fantasies anchored in predispositions concerning race, demeanor, sexuality, gender, and class — all of which are subtly called into question in *Flat is Beautiful*. Taylor's environment is suffused with these fantasies and narratives, some of which she resists, other of which she seems to absorb. While sitting quietly in her room, Taylor plays a boxing video game that pits a black opponent versus a white one, and she watches monster trucks on television (neither of which are stereotypical activities for a young girl). And, surrounded by posters of Madonna, Michael Jackson, and Kung Fu fighters, Taylor overhears her mother listening to a television talk show concerning a transsexual who is confronting his family. He states,



Alone in her room, Taylor not only daydreams and plays with dolls but plays a boxing video game with a racial micro-narrative ...



... and watches monster trucks on television.



Taylor's room, with posters of kung fu fighters ...



... and Madonna.

"There are people who feel they are trapped in a different body. I feel like a boy; I never felt like a girl. I felt like a freak."

The talk show host responds: "why didn't you ever go for help?" This person's dilemma (which mirrors many of Taylor's anxieties) is transformed into a media spectacle. Taylor wanders through a maze of such messages in public and private spaces — in fact, there is little or no break between these two realms, since we witness all of these messages as they are piped into her home as spectacles or brought into it in commodified form. As previously stated, the bedroom is the privileged physical setting in most of the works, but this space is filled and permeated with images, texts, objects, and sounds. As cited in the epigraph of this essay, Benning states in *If Every Girl had a Diary*,

"I start to feel more different now — even in this room with 800 million other faces."

Taylor does, however, "go for help," although not in the form that the talk show host may have implied. Taylor comes to some position of comfort by moving beyond the idealized bounds of the nuclear family, when she interrupts Quiggy's bath to speak with him about sexual desire. In their brief, awkward conversation Taylor quite simply, but circuitously, asks Quiggy what he would think if Taylor had "a girlfriend the way he has boyfriends." Their conversation, though brief and almost without content, offers sufficient verification of Taylor's physical, psychological, and emotional inclinations that she seems comfortable in her skin and mind.

After this exchange, she doesn't feel like a "freak," and can further improvise with the materials around her to fashion an identity that departs from — even as she borrows from — the inflexible and contradictory certainties of identity offered by mass culture. One of the simplest depictions of Taylor comes after this encounter, near the end of the video, when she sits quietly and intently playing a video game which perfectly renders her position of near social powerlessness and limited agency. The game involves a simple, flat, featureless figure navigating through a narrow maze that opens up before it — never opening to a long view, but at least opening up to simple new options. The figure moves inexorably forward through a maze of corridors and small rooms. The virtual space and movement of this game mirrors any number of public or private navigations that Taylor undertakes on a daily basis.

It's important to make note of one of Benning's principle technical innovations in this work and to consider how it successfully contributes to the video's subject matter. *Flat is Beautiful* is shot using both 16mm film and Pixelvision. By shifting from one medium to the other, Benning combines the fascinatingly grainy quality of Pixelvision with the clarity of 16mm film, thereby calling attention to the graphic quality of all of the images and resisting the apparent transparency of photographic realism. The use of Pixelvision utterly prohibits something like a "glamour" shot, a prohibition that is fundamentally important to this work. When the Pixelvision camera captures the glossy and glamorous poster of Madonna that adorns Taylor's bedroom wall, the result is an image totally void of content. We see only a pose and a body; we can recognize a genre of objectification, beauty, and glamour but can't experience the image as a commodity. Through Pixelvision the poster frankly looks absurd, and is exposed as a product. It no longer serves as an icon for conveying ideals of beauty or sexuality but conveys empty form.

Multiple resonances surround the title of the video, and they all have emerged, at least indirectly, by looking at and listening to specific sequences. "Flatness" is pervasive in the work. Many aspects of the film are visually flat and rendered as single depthless plane: the masks worn by the actors, the storefronts rendered to



Madonna poster close up.

us head-on from a single unmoving camera position, the screen images from Taylor's video games, and the posters in her room. The video's short, yet striking, animation sequences involve flat hand-drawn images. In effect, much of the environment of the video is presented as a flat plane, and this narrowness of vision directly corresponds with the limitations on Taylor's view of her surroundings. These limitations are both imposed by outside sources (the conceptually flat images of gender and sexuality perpetrated in the mass-media) but also sympathetically correspond to Taylor in a developmental sense. She is on the cusp of profound physical, psychological, and emotional change, but cannot yet see the "depth" of the transformations she is beginning to experience. The title also resonates with the body politics of the film, especially in the scene in which Taylor, while drawing a picture, adds on curves to the female body. As a "flat" tween, Taylor does not yet identify with the mass-mediated images of womanliness, which don't mirror her body in any respect.

As a final note on the work's formal texture, I call attention to the fact that in most shots of this video there's something to read, and very few frames of this video are without some kind of interaction or tension between word and image. The video also includes several animation sequences that combine photographs, drawings, and written text, with no image type ever assuming a position of primacy. They are always overlapping, and working together or against one another — in effect, defacing one another.



Taylor's video game: The figure, like Taylor, moves inexorably forward through a maze of corridors and small rooms with never a long view.

Benning appears to have gone out of her way to disrupt semiotic hierarchies and to eradicate the clarity and assurance so often created through photographic realism. To view this work, is (much like Taylor's own experience) to engage in an archeological sifting of image types and to be confronted with different systems of representation in various states of emergence, stasis, and even dysfunction.

I conclude by referencing another image from the last sequence of the film. Here we have an image of what's perhaps best described as broken language. The captions no longer work. We can read a history in this image--it's easy to see, at least in part, what the signs once said. But we can't understand it entirely. And yet this image of gaps, losses, and eroded or diminished meaning is perhaps one of the most compelling in the film. We can perhaps regard it as an analogue to Taylor, as it embodies the history and possibilities even of a young 11-year old child. Taylor already has been chipped and battered so-to-speak, but she also is learning to re-imagine and re-write her scripts. She already is a ruin; but at the





An image from the last sequence highlighting gaps, losses, and eroded or diminished meaning.

same time, she's a new being slowly emerging into a new kind of present.



Two images from *German Song*, which show a female mannequin used (by women) for target practice. Although the shooters are destroying what might be an oppressive icon of femininity, with its Barbie-like features, ...

... there is also a clear pathos to the images. This "model woman" has been battered but survived in a harsh, ruined environment. Taylor comes across as a similar survivor while also rejecting oppressive qualities of femininity.

[Go to Notes and Videography](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### Notes

1. Released in 1998 and available from Video Data Bank, which distributes all of Benning's early works. *Flat is Beautiful* runs 50 minutes. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. Quote by Kim Knowles (University of Edinburgh, UK): "Reading the Cinema: Text as Image in the Films of Hollis Frampton and Peter Rose," The Language of Images: An International, Interdisciplinary Conference on Text and Image, March 29-30, 2007 at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, CT. [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]
3. Here Taylor would relish the words of John Cage who playfully stated, "There are not just males and females, there are 80 kinds of males and 175 kinds of females" quoted by Carolyn Brown, *Chance and Circumstance* (NY: Knopf, 2007), p. 520.
4. Having taught the work several times, I've seen more than a few students indicate disappointment after this moment of overt stabilization.
5. Freud, Sigmund, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, Norton, NY (1989) p. 437.

### Videoworks by Sadie Benning

- *A New Year*, 1989 (6 min)
- *Living Inside*, 1989 (6 min)
- *Me and Rubyfruit*, 1990 (6 min)
- *If Every Girl Had a Diary*, 1990 (6 min)
- *Jollies*, 1990 (11 min)
- *A Place called Lovely*, 1991 (14 min)
- *It wasn't Love*, 1992 (20 min)
- *Girlpower*, 1992 (15 min)
- *German Song*, 1995 (6 min)
- *Judy Spots*, 1995 ( 13 min)
- *Flat is Beautiful*, 1998 (50 min)



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

This film has been modified from its original theatrical version for language and content.

*Y tu mamá también* — or not! "This film has been modified from its original theatrical version for language and content."



Even the film's opening — one might say establishing — shot was cut.



In media interruptus: the R-Rated *Y tu* begins after Ana (Ana López Mercado) and Tenoch (Diego Luna) have already climaxed.

## Sex versus the small screen: home video censorship and Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*

by [Caetlin Benson-Allott](#)

Seventeen years ago, video critic Charles Tashiro warned that “you can wait for it on video, but ‘it,’ like Godot, will never arrive,” and today his aesthetic lament carries political implications as well (16). Video-tapes and -discs have changed our experience of motion picture exhibition significantly over the past thirty-odd years, due in part to the unprecedented proliferation of adaptation techniques like letterboxing, Pan & Scan editing, and color correction. However, some movies also lose footage during their transfer to video, particularly sexually and politically charged footage. In these cases, you see less of the movie on video than the full theatrical release. Motion pictures do go through many editing processes over the course of their production and distribution, of course, but these just-for-video elisions cut their movies’ narratives, tenor, and arguments, often without acknowledging the loss.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Furthermore, these video excisions almost exclusively affect international productions. The result is that this video editing effectively determines who gets to see which international releases and what parts of them, given that most U.S. viewers now choose to or must “wait for it on video” (Klinger 4). This media-specific censorship suggests that video faces different moral standards than the cinema, standards that are enforced by the MPAA’s self-interested nationalist application of its rating system. However, it would be inaccurate to characterize either the MPAA or its member studios as specifically xenophobic. Rather they self-censor in order to appease video rental and sell-through outlets’ conservative economic clout.

Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también* is only one of the many victims of the U.S. video industry’s commercial adversity to foreignness and sexuality. However, the changes made for U.S. video distribution of Cuarón’s film are not only egregious but also exemplary, because they highlight the political ramifications of the MPAA and U.S. studios’ new economic dependence on video distribution. Specifically, MGM cut five minutes from *Y tu*’s film version in order to produce an R-rated video acceptable to the major video outlets’ standards for family friendly commercial viability. Although the studio also distributed an unrated “special edition” of Cuarón’s movie as it appeared in theaters, the R-rated standard edition the director put together at MGM’s behest led Cuarón to lament,

“I castrated my movie” (Hirschberg 15).

As I will show, Cuarón had to cede to MGM’s demand for a family-friendly video version of *Y tu* in order to secure *any* U.S. distribution for his film. However, this more marketable *Y tu* is missing more than a few penises and pelvic thrusts. Cuarón also had to cut the sexual *mestizaje* that completes his film’s narrative



Despite their class difference, Julio (Gael García Bernal) and Tenoch dress and groom alike at the beginning of *Y tu mamá también*.



The film then cuts to Tenoch, Julio, and their friend Saba (Andrés Almeida) rolling joints and discussing ecstasy, but as part of the same attempt to capture contemporary Mexican economic stratification.



Despite their grand plans to cheat on Ana and Ceci, Tenoch and Julio only dance together as their summer of hedonism commences.

arc and political allegory.[2] This climax, the homosexual union of the movie's teenage male protagonists, carries both dramatic and political significance in the film because Cuarón uses Mexico's national tradition of allegorical filmmaking to condemn the neoliberal turn in Mexican politics.[3] Losing the culmination of the boys' sexual narrative garbles Cuarón's critique of government corruption and economic exploitation in Mexico. In this way, the editing sanitizes the film for some of the same multinational corporations that benefit most from recent trade liberalizations in Mexico, of which NAFTA is one (notorious) example.[4]

*Y tu*'s U.S. video distribution thus made it the subject of the same transnational neoliberal forces that it seeks to critique. For that reason, in this article I will employ both textual analysis and industry history to demonstrate how the giant video retailers have rendered video an even more fiscally—as so politically—conservative format than film. The first section of the essay details what gets censored from the R-rated *Y tu*, while the second section explores how those losses undermines the film's larger political critique. My conclusion then situates *Y tu mamá también* within the recent upheaval in U.S. film and video distribution that made these changes seem fiscally necessary to its distributors. In this manner, I hope to communicate the political significance of Hollywood's economic dependence on video distribution.

## Formal economics: story, structure, and narration in *Y tu mamá también*

In order to explain what is missing from the R-rated *Y tu mamá también*, I must first briefly summarize the film's plot and voice-over narration and contextualize their contributions to the allegorical significance of the movie's queer climax. *Y tu mamá también* opens just after its protagonists, Tenoch Iturbide (Diego Luna) and Julio Zapata (Gael García Bernal), graduate from high school in the summer of 1999. Despite their close friendship, Tenoch and Julio come from radically different class backgrounds: Tenoch is the son of a wealthy undersecretary of state while Julio's single mother works as a secretary in a large factory. The movie opens with the boys saying goodbye to their girlfriends, who are spending the summer in Italy. Alone and without any responsibilities, they meet up with their friend Saba (Andrés Almeida) to inaugurate a season of sexual infidelity and drug use.



Well, perhaps we shouldn't say *only* dance ...



... they do do lots of other things alone together as well.

Their hedonistic plans quickly deteriorate into ennui, however, and Julio and Tenoch find themselves reduced to smoking pot and horsing around a deserted country club. Then the wedding of Tenoch's sister, Jessica, brings the boys in contact with Luisa Cortés (Maribel Verdú), the wife of Tenoch's cousin Jano. Luisa recently moved to Mexico City from her native Madrid, and her European sophistication quickly arouses the boys' interest. They try to kindle hers by inviting her to join them on a hastily fabricated road trip to a made-up beach,



Heaven's Mouth. Recognizing Heaven's Mouth as a MacGuffin, Luisa initially rebuffs their advances, but after her doctor delivers some upsetting test results and her husband announces that he slept with another woman, she decides to accompany the boys on their mythic vacation.



*Y tu* begins some scenes with politically contextualizing shots, in this case, snapshots of the body guards who literally frame Tenoch's sister's wedding reception...



... where the boys first meet Luisa (Maribel Verdú). The scene ends with a return to the bodyguards and drivers, waiting in the parking lot for the party to likewise end.



Thus *Y tu* and its narrator frame Tenoch and Julio's story in a story about the Mexican working class, while also using their story as a frame tale to explore their exploitation.



As Luisa receives her medical exam results, the camera lingers outside the office door, a distancing conceit employed many times throughout the film that bolsters its pseudo-cinema verité effect. Soon after Luisa calls Tenoch to accept the boys' invitation to Heaven's Mouth. During the call, the camera follows ...



... Tenoch's nanny, Leo (Liboria Rodríguez), through his palatial house as she brings him a grilled cheese sandwich. The ringing phone is the only commentary on her labor, but when she answers it for Tenoch (on the eighth ring), it's a sad critique of how working class Mexico facilitates the life of its elite.

The names of these three travelers hint at the national allegory at work in *Y tu mamá también*. For although Cuarón's movie loosens the rigid identifications that typically structure allegory, the script nonetheless uses fiction to invoke Mexican history and thereby reject contemporary political corruption and economic exploitation. Thus the names carry important historical resonances:

- Tenoch Iturbide recalls both the Aztec city Tenochtitlán upon which Mexico City was built and Augustín de Iturbide, the leader of Mexico's War of Independence (1810-1821).
- Luisa Cortés is named for the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés.
- Julio Zapata invokes the Revolutionary insurgent Emiliano Zapata.



*Y tu* often uses costume design to

add political commentary to its romantic narrative. In this case, Sub-commandante Marco appears on Tenoch's tee-shirt as he and Luisa plan their trip south.



Agustín de Iturbide (Petronilo Monroy, 1865).



Emiliano Zapata (artist unknown).

Each character's name comments on his or her colonial and class status in the film's fiction while simultaneously reminding the viewer of Mexico's enduring struggle for national unity. Their names recall both Mexico's colonial history and its history of insurrection. In this way, the script encourages us to regard *Y tu* as a new sort of national mythmaking in which the legendary figures of Mexico's political past reassemble so we can reexamine their influence on the country's current economic stratification and political strife.



Like Julio's sister, Tenoch also occasionally wears a military beret, but without any evident allegiance to the ongoing national conflict it recalls.

- The film invests Iturbide with the name of the Aztec leader who founded Tenochtitlán, a juxtaposition that foregrounds the complicated relationship between colonization and conquest in Mexico's history, since Iturbide both freed Mexico from the Spanish rule established by Cortés in 1519 and later became a despot in his own right.
- Luisa embodies a similar paradox as Cortés' namesake, inhabiting the roles of both the Spanish conquistador and *La malinche*, his interpreter and mistress, who is understood in contemporary Mexican culture as a traitor, victim, and national mother figure. Luisa inhabits all of these conflicting connotations as she both conquers the boys through her sexual appeal and simultaneously creates possibilities for a new *mestizaje*.<sup>[5]</sup>
- Finally, Julio Zapata adds a leading figure of the Mexican Revolution whose name was taken up by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Chiapas, Mexico in 1983. While Julio himself is hardly a revolutionary, his sister is a radical activist and political science student who (we are told) only lends Julio the family car for his road trip so that she can later use it to deliver supplies to the Zapatistas. Julio's name thus affirms the significance of the Zapatistas in Mexican political history and recontextualizes the rural poverty that frames the trio's allegorical assignments.



Julio's sister wears a military uniform

Another major strategy by which the film scripts political commentary is through the comments of an anonymous voice-over narrator. Political backstories and other information of this sort often enter *Y tu* through this voice-over narration, which is supplied by an unusually assertive non-diegetic narrator. This narrator, who is never named and never appears in the film, seems to follow Julio and Tenoch's road trip as an organizing narrative structure, almost a frame tale, through which he can investigate the political and



reminiscent of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, a nod to the siblings' last name.

economic context that makes their trip possible. That investigation often pulls the narrator's—and thus our—attention away from Tenoch and Julio into what María Saldaña-Portillo calls the film's "interstitial scenes," moments when the camera and audio track temporarily abandon Julio and Tenoch to pursue other interests (769). Specifically, the camera pans or tracks away from the boys to examine the other lives and socio-economic experiences that the boys pass by. Thus at one point the camera turns from Tenoch and Julio's car to examine a pair of roadside crosses they fail to notice. As he does during all his looks away, the narrator mutes all diegetic noise during his ensuing commentary. In this instance, he explains how ten years earlier a chicken farmer and his child died in an auto accident at this spot, thus offering an understanding of the highway, its uses, and its dangers very different from the boys'.



... the camera leaves her story to find out more about the restaurant where she is eating.

The narrator repeatedly foregrounds, and sometimes mutes the diegesis to comment on, other experiences of the highway besides pleasure trips.

As Luisa explains why she first fell for Juno...



The narrator commandeers the windshield to cite a traffic fatality the boys know nothing about.



Another cross the trio do not notice; they're busy agreeing to Luisa's manifesto.

Critics have tended to read the narrator's asides as opposed to the movie's narrative, as critiques of the boys' solipsism and the solipsism of narrative in general. But in fact the narrator's comments highlight the boys' obliviousness to their surroundings as they brag to Luisa about their indomitable friendship, fraternal manifesto, and drug use. [6]



Ernesto "Che" Guevara watches



The film uses the boys' fear of drug

Tenoch and Julio prod Saba for directions to a “Heaven’s Mouth.” Che’s poster in this scene could speak either to the commodification of his image or the political commitment of the film’s production design.

busts to document the presence of the Mexican army in the lives of its country’s citizens.



The radiator explodes when Luisa suggests anal pleasure.

Luisa likewise appears naively disengaged from the poverty they pass as she informs Julio and Tenoch about her life in Spain and advises them on sexual techniques. When Luisa suggests that the boys experiment with anal stimulation, however, they are so shocked that the car’s radiator symbolically explodes. This mechanical failure and the sexual rupture it represents mark a change in the nature of the journey, and shortly thereafter, Luisa takes Tenoch to bed. After Julio walks in on their awkward union, he jealously informs Tenoch that he once slept with Ana, Tenoch’s girlfriend. This sexual rivalry deeply threatens the boys’ friendship, in part because their mutual insults quickly become class-based. However, when Luisa observes their hostility the next day, she blames herself and decides to seduce Julio to even their score. Tenoch responds by telling Julio that he also had sex with Julio’s girlfriend, Ceci, and in the ensuing fight, the boys become so violent and immature that Luisa abandons their trip. When they beg her for another chance, she acquiesces only on the condition that they follow her manifesto from now on, which includes a provision that she will no longer sleep with either of them, although they are free “to screw each other if [they] like.”





Borrowing shampoo for Julio leads to Tenoch and Luisa's first sexual encounter.



Immediately after, the boys go swimming, transposing their issues with "lasting" beneath the water.



Only the viewer knows that the tensions between Tenoch and Julio come from the latter's dalliance with the former's girlfriend. Luisa blames herself.

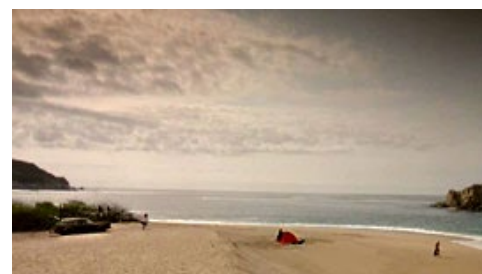
Like Tenoch, the viewer of the R-rated *Y tu* also wants to see more of Julio and Luisa's love scene.



When the boys' insults turn violent, Luisa points out their fraternal hypocrisy and abandons their vacation.

"You're free to screw each other if you like!"

Luisa's caveat soon becomes the film's climax. After the boys miraculously manage to find a beach like the one they described (Fig. 34 and 35), the trio are discovered in their idyll by a local fisherman and his wife, Chuy and Mabel, who offer to take the friends on a tour of the local coves, including one called Heaven's Mouth (Fig. 37 and 38). The beach tour ends in pandemonium after a pack of stray pigs destroys the travelers' campsite, so they decide to rent a room from Chuy and Mabel and celebrate the success of their trip with tequila shots at a local cantina. There they toast Jano, the clitoris, and Tenoch's mother before Julio and Tenoch join Luisa in a bar dance that quickly leads to the bedroom and the beginnings of a ménage-a-trois.



Heaven's Mouth.

Chuy (Silverio Palacios).

Stuck at Heaven's Mouth.



Chuy and Mabel (Mayra Serbulo), an indigenous fisherman and his wife, arrive to take the travelers on a tour of local coves and then to the bar where they will consummate their voyage.



At Heaven's Mouth, Chuy, Julio, and Tenoch play soccer together in a homosocial scene devoid of class markings.



A band of pigs, escaped from a local ranch, ruin the campsite and force the travelers to go home with Chuy and Mabel, but the narrator knows that they will also soon cause an outbreak of trichinosis at local festival.



As the travelers return to the campsite, the narrator announces that next year Chuy will be forced out of his ancestral fishing waters by an transnational hotel chain.



In one of its most beautiful double-image shots, *Y tu* watches Luisa say goodbye to Jano through a phone booth window while another window reflects Tenoch and Julio playing foosball, oblivious to her tragedies that motivated her to accompany them on this trip.



The travelers toast Jano, the clitoris, and Mexico.



During her seductive bar dance, Luisa makes direct eye contact with the viewer, acknowledging her voyeuristic involvement in the *mestizaje* to come.

What happens next depends on which edition of the movie you see. If you have the R-rated version, then the ménage-a-trois culminates with Luisa in her underwear sitting back on Julio's lap while Tenoch gropes for hers. If you watch the unrated *Y tu*, however, then Tenoch's hand gets to reach its destination, and Luisa pulls Julio up with her until all three lovers are standing together. The boys then remove Luisa's panties, after which she pulls off their pants and gradually descends below the bottom of the frame, presumably to either fellate or manually stimulate the boys. Julio and Tenoch now appear alone together, and as they turn towards each other, they slowly begin what becomes a passionate embrace. From there, the movie cuts abruptly to the next morning, to





At the end of the R-rated *Y tu*'s climatic sex scene, Luisa is still positioned between the two boys.

shots of Chuy working on his boat and Mabel and Luisa discussing beaches over breakfast. Only then does the camera return to the bedroom, where it finds Tenoch and Julio passed out naked together, although they each quickly bolt from their bed to vomit and find some "hair of the dog," respectively. Both boys then insist that they must return to Mexico City as soon as possible, although Luisa chooses to stay in San Bernabé and explore more beaches.



In the unrated *Y tu*, the scene ends with a suggestive kiss just between Tenoch and Julio.



It then immediately cuts to Chuy working on his boat ...



... and Luisa and Mabel feeding the children in the kitchen ...



... before returning to the lovers' bedroom.

This morning-after scene carries very different implications depending on which wild night your copy of *Y tu* contains. To be more precise, the scene's very plausibility hinges on what sort sexual shenanigans the movie is allowed to imply. The R-rated *Y tu* can only code Julio and Tenoch's reactions as overreactions to some mild sexual experimentation. The boys already "shared" Luisa in one sense, so their mutual rapid departure feels unnecessary and under-motivated, and the concluding dissolution of their friendship seems almost nonsensical. For as the narrator reports, after Tenoch and Julio leave Luisa in San Bernabé, they cease to be intimates (emotionally, let alone sexually) and eventually lose touch entirely:

"After returning from Europe, Cecelia and Ana broke up with Tenoch and Julio. Two months later, Tenoch started dating his neighbor. Nine months later, Julio started dating a girl from his French class. Julio and Tenoch stopped seeing each other."

"The following summer, the ruling party lost the presidential election for the first time in seventy-one years. Julio ran into Tenoch on his way to the dentist. Going for a cup of coffee was easier than making excuses to avoid it."

Over coffee, the boys catch up on the lives of their friends Saba and Daniel and their respective college plans: Julio will study biology at a local community college, while Tenoch will pursue economics at the university. When these topics wear thin, Tenoch asks Julio,

“Did you hear about Luisa?”

Evidently Luisa died one month after they left her in San Bernabé from a cancer that had spread throughout her body. Tenoch explains that Luisa knew about the illness before their trip, and his revelation allows us to appreciate retroactively the significance of her medical test results. While we process these additions to her character, the narrator takes over Luisa’s story and provides details Tenoch cannot, describing her last days and bequeathments. He ends by observing,

“Tenoch excused himself. His girlfriend was waiting for him at the movies. Julio insisted on paying the check. They will never meet again.”

We are given no explanation for the finality of this decree, for the fatality of a friendship that initially seemed so joyous and invulnerable. Their ménage-a-trois alone cannot justify this termination, because the boys laughed about sleeping with each other’s girlfriends that very night.[7] They even drank to being “milk brothers,” so it seems inconceivable that sharing one woman could end their association.

Indeed, the unrated *Y tu* confirms that it was not a ménage-a-trois that ruined the boys’ friendship, because it uses the formal limits on depictions of sexuality established by the Hays Code to imply that their erotic experiences did not stop there.[8] The unrated group grope ends with the boys alone on screen and later cuts to them alone in bed the next morning, a tried and true cinematic conceit to suggest that the boys had sex together, not with Luisa. Furthermore, the gendered iconography the film rehearses before discovering them in bed confirms their union even if the movie declines to show it.

As I mentioned earlier, the morning-after scene opens with Chuy engaged in the manly work of fixing his boat’s engine while Luisa and Mabel make breakfast, chat about the beaches, and feed the children. When the camera finally turns to Tenoch and Julio, they are removed from both the masculine scene of labor and the feminine scene of domestic production. They occupy a third space outside of the heterosexual order, that of lovers lolling in bed. Because Luisa is already part of the kitchen scene and not hung-over with Tenoch and Julio, she is not coded as part of the previous evening’s sexual shenanigans. She was not part of the final kiss, and she was not in bed the next morning; she simply was not there. In this context, the boys’ panicked departure and subsequent alienation from each other become tragic but comprehensible examples of internalized homophobia. Without the mediation of a woman, the milk brothers must face their desire for one another’s “vanilla,” as they so crudely put it, and they cannot. Indeed, they literally cannot face each other. When they subsequently meet for coffee, Julio sprawls sideways on his banquette while Tenoch sits at the table. As their conversation turns to Luisa’s death, i.e. the loss of the final mediation between them, the camera breaks from the customary two-shot with which it typically frames the boys and into a shot-reverse-shot pattern that emphasizes their new distance. “They will never meet again,” because without Luisa or the girlfriends they shared, they have no artificial bridge to cover their real connection.



Julio and Tenoch drink to being “milk brothers”...



... and again to Julio’s intimate familiarity with Tenoch’s mother.



When they go for coffee, Julio lounges sideways on his banquette,

[Go to page 2](#)



so the boys literally do not have to  
face one another.

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Illicit Sex: Ceci's parents don't want her sleeping with Julio, and neither does MGM.



More than anything else, what's missing from the R-rated versions of Luisa's sex-scenes with Tenoch and Julio is the boys' incompetence.



In the unrated *Y tu*, the viewer can see the full extent of the boys'

### Censure and narration: unpacking (the loss of) the queer allegory in *Y tu mamá también*

In the unrated *Y tu*, the boys' concluding alienation provides a tragic note crucial to the film's political allegory, and without it, the narrator is unable to clarify properly the political tensions he has hinted at throughout the film. Yet in order to appreciate the mechanics of this allegorical resolution and its failure in the R-rated *Y tu*, a few more observations need to be made about the specific scenes censored in *Y tu*. Many scenes of sexual content were cut from the R-rated version, including all of the pre-orgasmic thrusting between Tenoch and Ana in the film's first scene, Julio and Ceci's quick consummation while searching for her passport, the majority of Tenoch and Luisa's and Julio and Luisa's love scenes, and many passing glances at the boys' penises.[9] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Even the movie's subtitles help to obscure its sexual content, for in the R-rated *Y tu* several lines of dialogue are intentionally mistranslated. When Luisa tries to advise the boys on how to make love to their girlfriends in the unrated *Y tu*, she asks, "You ever wiggle your finger up the ass?" whereupon they scream, "Ass?" and the car's radiator explodes under the pressure of the anus' potential as a site of pleasure. The R-rated *Y tu* reinterprets Luisa's question as, "You ever touch her softly from behind?" which enables the preposition "from" to recode "behind" as the place where the boys might be in relationship to their girlfriends rather than the place where their girlfriends might enjoy being touched. When the boys then scream, "Behind?" and the radiator breaks, a clever viewer might still catch an allusion to anal pleasure, but syntactically it has been removed from the film.

These elisions all work to straighten and sanitize Cuarón's movie, but the excision of Tenoch and Julio's love scene nonetheless represents an important special case in motion picture censorship, since *a priori* one cannot cut a shot that was never filmed. That is, while the R-rated *Y tu mamá también* deletes a few heterosexual love scenes and brief glimpses of the boys' penises, it cannot actually remove the queer sex, because it was never really there to begin with. The boys never have (simulated) sex on-screen in either edition of *Y tu*, which makes MGM's censorship of that scene essentially theoretical and therefore the key to the movie's political dismemberment. Remember: the last time we see Julio and Tenoch on the (unrated) night in question, they have only just begun to kiss, even if the proximity of their bodies and the increasing passion of their embrace imply that they are going to have sex. So although the R-rated *Y tu* leaves the love scene while Luisa is still positioned between the two boys, the content it is repressing, i.e. homosexual sex, is repressed in

competition.



However, in the R-rated *Y tu* such shots are discreetly removed from the race. Only shots in which the murky water intervenes in our access to the boys' bodies remain.



Sex is more awkward than erotic for most of *Y tu*, which only emphasizes the utopian uniqueness of the boy's one night together.



The narrator also often uses his commentary to reveal elements of the protagonists' experience that they

the unrated movie as well. Gay sex is thus *Y tu's* impossible dream; it represents the film's allegorical ideal of *mestizaje*, its utopia, Heaven's Mouth.

This queer allegory matters, because MGM would not have spent its money, nor Alfonso Cuarón his time, to rid *Y tu mamá también* of a scene that was never present anyway unless those changes would have significant effects on the movie's marketability. Indeed, the effects were significant, because MGM did not just cut sex. Because Julio and Tenoch have sex within a politicized, quasi-allegorical narrative, their sexual connection has a radical tenor that even exceeds its homoerotic significance. By ridding the movie of its queer utopia, it undermined the tragic note of the film's denouement and so cut (potentially unmarketable) politics. When MGM eliminates their culminating embrace, therefore, the studio does not simply undermine the movie's conclusion. It destroys Cuarón's indictment of neoliberalism, NAFTA, and their effects on Mexican *mestizaje*, because it compromises the narrator's ability to make sense of Tenoch and Julio's relationship. We must return therefore to the nondiegetic narrator, to his role in and structuring of *Y tu*, in order to appreciate how he works throughout the film to tie the boys' sexual journey to Mexico's national politics and create a cohesive political allegory around their homoerotic union.

From his first interjection, *Y tu's* narrator explicitly relates his interest in class to the boys' sexual relationships:

"Ana's mother, a French divorcée, taught at the Learning Institute for Foreigners. She did not object to Tenoch sleeping with her daughter. For Julio it was different. He could only stay with Cecelia until dinner and had to come back in the morning for the trip to the airport. Cecelia's father, a pediatrician specializing in allergies, thought his daughter's relationship with Julio had gone too far. Her mother, a Lacanian psychologist, saw it differently. She believed their relationship was innocent."

This introduction must be quoted at length, because it demonstrates why the narrator has chosen to follow Tenoch and Julio's story. If, as Hester Baer and Ryan Long suggest, "the disembodied voice-over—sometimes referred to as the 'voice of god'—possesses absolute authority and mastery over the narrative," then the narrator must be credited with selecting the story he presents as well as the manner in which it is presented (158).

The above introduction teaches us why the narrator is interested in Julio and Tenoch, because it asks us to read the boys' sexual exploits as class narratives: Ana's mother does not mind Tenoch's relationship with her daughter because she is a divorced school teacher while he is the son of an under-secretary of state, but Cecelia's professional parents either object to or are in denial about Julio's relationship to their daughter because, as the narrator will soon reveal, Julio's mother is only a secretary. Class is thus a determining factor in the boys' sexual narrative, just as it is in all the extradiegetic anecdotes the narrator relates. The narrator thus appears to be intrigued by the boys' story because class affects their access to sex, the barometer of social power and prestige in their peer group, and so can render their world a microcosmic allegory for Mexican



hide from each other. In this case, passing the city of Tepelmeme allows Tenoch to reflect on how little he knows about his nanny, Leo, who was born there.



When Julio attempts to spit on Tenoch during their fight, the formerly implicit classism in the boys' insults becomes explicit.



Later the police provide the backdrop for a discussion of the boys' sexual abilities...



... and how Tenoch's girlfriend must "beg for mercy."

national politics.

The narrator's introductory emphasis on class also contextualizes his first turn away from the boys a few minutes later. As Tenoch and Julio drive home from the airport, exchanging jokes about farts and the sexual charms of "left-wing chicks," they find themselves caught traffic jam, which they attribute to a political demonstration but the narrator associates with a pedestrian fatality:

"On that day, three demonstrations took place across the city. Nevertheless, the traffic jam was caused by Marcelino Escutia, a migrant bricklayer from Michoacán who was hit by a speeding bus. He never used the pedestrian bridge, because its poor location would force him to walk two extra kilometers to his worksite. The Red Cross took his unidentified body to the city morgue. It took four days for the corpse to be claimed."

Perhaps because the narrator proceeds from this explanation to a description of Tenoch's wealth and the drugs that he and his friends consume, critics have tended to assume that the narrator means to oppose Tenoch's story to Marcelino Escutia's and use Escutia's death as a critique of Tenoch's hedonism (Baer and Long 158-159, Saldaña-Portillo 769). However, a better understanding of the non-diegetic narrator's role suggests that their stories ought to be read holistically, as part of the same narrative. Marcelino Escutia's narrator is also Tenoch and Julio's narrator, and it is precisely the juxtaposition of their stories that reveals the *economic* framework inherent in the boys' tale. For if the omniscient male "voice-over is an 'undemocratic' assertion of male authority and control," as Kaja Silverman and others have proposed, that "functions, on a formal level, to contain and direct the film's meaning for the viewer," then one cannot simply dismiss Tenoch and Julio's story as the spoonful of sugar this narrator or his filmmakers add to make the political commentary go down (Silverman 157, Baer and Long 159).

As Mariá Saldaña-Portillo points out, *Y tu*'s filmic asides document the struggles and untimely deaths of working and impoverished Mexican subjects. However, Tenoch and Julio's story represents the other side of the same political situation, i.e. Mexico after twenty years of neoliberal government and five years after the implementation of NAFTA.[10] By bringing these disenfranchised characters into Julio and Tenoch's story as asides, the narrator connects the latter's tale of middle-class hedonism and privilege to the former's stories of struggle, stories traditionally excluded from or silenced by dominant accounts of Latin American neoliberalism. Yet by fusing these disparate experiences, the narrator leads the viewer into a broader understanding of Mexico's current socio-economic disparities. That said, precisely because the narrator is capable of looking away from Julio and Tenoch, every moment he chooses to stay with or in their narrative deserves to be read as a political choice. Because it too is a story of neoliberalism, the boys' story is just as politically freighted as that of Luisa Obregón and equally as representative of the narrator's interest in neoliberal Mexico:

"Doña Martina gave Luisa the figure of the mouse with her name on it. It had belonged to her granddaughter, Luisa Obregón, who had died of a heatstroke fifteen years ago, while



crossing the border in Arizona with her parents, seeking a better life."

The narrator's interjections thus affirm (along with the characters' names) that *Y tu*



The narrator turns the camera from Tenoch's car to take a wider view of the traffic fatality that slows the boys' progress to their party...



... then returns to the car to examine the body from the context of their frame tale.



Luisa discovers the shrine for a little girl with her name who died of thirst trying to cross the US-Mexico border. The girl's grandmother gives her the mouse, which becomes a rearview mirror memento mori for the rest of her voyage.

"functions as an allegory, presenting the viewer with a cinematic interpretation of the changing nature of Mexican sovereignty, subaltern positionality, and colonial fantasy in the context of neoliberalism historically represented by NAFTA" (Saldaña-Portillo 751).

Yet some critics still dismiss Tenoch and Julio's desire as a "homosexually charged Oedipal complex," a mere "plot device" (Saldaña-Portillo 751). This argument ignores the narrator's sincere interest in the boys, not to mention their allegorical value in *Y tu*'s filmic compilation of neoliberal Mexican experiences. The characters' names comment on the need for a new national allegory. In that context the boys' encounters with the lives around them remind us that their one utopian night together is part of the film's attempt to envision a new *mexicanidad*, one that might heal the complex fracturing of national experience that followed Mexico's transition to neoliberalism. Indeed, the movie's commitment to reading the boys through an allegorical frame even extends to the way the camera films them, as Cuarón himself explains:

"In that film, social environment is as important as character. That means you don't do close-ups because by doing close-ups you're favoring character over social environment. *So you have to stay wide, trying not only to blend your character with social environment but to create the contrast between your character and your social environment.*" (emphasis mine)

In short, it is precisely the narrator's interest in Tenoch and Julio that documents NAFTA's effects on both Mexico's working and rising middle classes and leads us to read the former's tragedy as part of the latter's success and denial. *Y tu* literally shows us how the *mestizaje* of Mexico's national mythography and the boys' allegorical union comes at the expense of the impoverished and dispossessed that the boys pass (and to some degree exploit) during their travels.[11] As Saldaña-Portillo observes, rural

"Mexico has historically sustained political *mestizaje*, enabled it, served it, and enveloped it, while nevertheless remaining marginal to this allegory of revolutionary nationalism" (767).

*Y tu mamá también* inserts that exploitation into Mexico's tradition of allegorical filmmaking and simultaneously uses the allegorical mode to personify the machismo, homophobia, and class bias that has kept Mexico from becoming a true *mestizaje*.

The movie's dénouement pulls this critique into focus through the narrator's nonsequitur comment on national politics, but that critique still relies on Tenoch and Julio's allegorical scene of homosexual *mestizaje* in order to register as such. Without their full embrace, the boys

become insufficient as allegories, and the film ends in a muddle of unclear motivations instead of radical suggestion. As I mentioned before, the denouement begins with the narrator's summation of Julio and Tenoch's dating lives after the beach trip, intercut with the observation that

"the following summer, the ruling party lost the presidential election for the first time in seventy-one years."

*Y tu* thus takes advantage of film's ability

"to stage temporalized cultural contradictions not only within the shot, through *mise-en-scène*, décor, costume, and so forth, but also through the interplay and contradictions between the diverse tracks, which can mutually shadow, jostle, undercut, haunt, and relativize one another" (Stam 38).

The narrator uses the dénouement to bind aurally the boys' futures to Mexican politics: they first see each other as the narrator begins to announce the 2000 victory of the Partido Acción Nacional over the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, and they shake hands as his sentence becomes syntactically complete.[12] Furthermore, when they meet again, the boys emphasize their distance from their past intimacy through ironic class distinctions in their clothes. Julio now ties his hair back and wears a sloppy approximation of professional dress while Tenoch has taken to greasing his hair (ducktail and all) and sporting a stylized motorcycle jacket. Class has come between them, differentiated them, and offered them codes with which to disavow their previous naked connection (albeit codes that rely on citations of the other boy's class status). As Saldaña-Portillo interprets the scene,

"The homophobic aversion the boys express towards each other after they have sex... is symptomatic of the revulsion that is at the heart of the PRI elite's appraisal of the popular classes."

However, the boys' outfits reaffirm that *Y tu* means to root their homophobia in class *desire* as well as class anxiety (767). Indeed, the boys' cross-class costumes sadly suggest that they can only cite (as opposed to perform or inhabit) their desires. As their clothes and demeanors suggest, class bias and homophobia have mutually directed the boys away from the queer *mestizaje* they created in San Bernabé, making gay union and political union equally impossible—two mythical Heaven's Mouths (Pérez-Torres 192).

Yet this interpretation only becomes available if the boys get to have (implicit) sex. If not, if you see the R-rated *Y tu*, then there can be no metaphoric reading of the discomfort they express in one another's presence at the coffee shop. Their dress now only signifies the paradoxical fashions of their social cliques, because there is no trauma, no forbidden transgression of heteronormativity and class prohibitions for it to refer to. When Tenoch leans back and crosses his arms protectively as Julio brings him up to date on their gay friend Daniel, his actions have no political significance, because they no longer suggest that Tenoch is suffering from an internalized homophobia brought to the fore by an experience of *mestizaje* that his culture will not condone. These absences disrupt the narrator's ability to interpret his own story, since most voice-overs only



Julio accepts a hat from the mechanic who will fix his car—an economic oddity to which he seems oblivious.



When the boys' meet again one year later, their reunion is aurally (and with subtitles also visually) obscured by the narrator's announcement that in the summer of 2000, the PRI lost the Mexican presidential election for the first time in seventy-one years.



Whereas Julio now wears a collared shirt and sweater...



have to mask the spectator's castration, not the movie's:



... Tenoch has taken to greasing his hair back and approximating a working-class appearance.



Throughout most of the road trip, *Y tu* frames Julio and Tenoch in two-shots, emphasizing their unity and fraternity.



The prevalence of these two-shots thus emphasizes their distance when they meet again at the coffee shop, when they literally cannot face one another.

"The voice-over in classic Hollywood cinema, usually spoken by a film's protagonist, is an 'ideological operation' that sutures over the 'trauma of castration' present in every film experience. As psychoanalytic film critic Kaja Silverman argues, the viewer is always on the verge of discovering this castration—his or her own lack of mastery over the filmic event—as cuts and edits reveal the artifice of the filmic experience. As an ideological operation, the voice-over disavows this lack, 'since it restores the viewer to his or her preordained subject-position and re-secures existing power relations.'" (Saldaña-Portillo 771-772)

The narrator of the unrated *Y tu mamá también* performs precisely this function, covering over the spectator's lack of mastery by asserting a mastery of his own. Each time he commandeers the camera and the audio track, the narrator indicates that he has complete control of his film. The spectator can therefore assuage her lack of mastery by identifying with the narrator, although such an identification conveniently requires that she agree with the narrator's political opinions (or at least entertain them for the duration of the film). The R-rated *Y tu* undermines this identification, however, because the narrator is unable to suture over the "trauma of [his narrative's] castration" (Silverman 12). There is no longer any logic to provide closure to the movie or its argument. Although we still know "they will never meet again," we cannot figure out why. *Mestizaje* failed, but it just failed, because the R-rated *Y tu* replaces the rift neoliberalism left in Mexico's economy with the rift of a missing climax.

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### Major censorship: MPAA and the demotion of foreign films in the home video era

Given their egregious effect on the movie, MGM's cuts to the R-rated *Y tu mamá también* may seem like an unprecedented disruption of the movie's art and politics. However, the studio's excisions are only the latest development in the contentious relationship between foreign films and the U.S. studios' industrial organization, the MPAA. Film critics and distributors have long accused the MPAA and its Classifications and Rating Administration (CARA) of censoring international movies and of doing so to protect the market interests of their member studios (Vaughn 197, Segrave 180). Yet the nature of that censorship has changed in the video era.

The home entertainment branches of the Hollywood studios now use CARA to *exploit the commercial potential* of video-only censorship by releasing edited versions of international films that conform to the major video retailers' "decency policies." If this multi-edition censorship does not stand out in the contemporary video marketplace, it is only because it mimics a parallel trend in domestic video distribution. Many U.S. movies are now available for home exhibition in additional versions marked as unrated or Collector's editions or as Director's Cuts. These English-language multi-version releases usually feature bonus material not included in the theatrical release (such as scenes deleted to facilitate a more marketable rating or running time). Both of these marketing strategies are made possible by video's famed economy of scale (i.e., video's cheaper distribution platform facilitates a greater variety of product); however, only foreign films lose footage in the deal.

Thus the censorship of Julio and Tenoch's love scene matters not only because it garbles Cuarón's movie but also because it exemplifies the latest challenge to foreign film distribution in the United States. The U.S. film industry has always sought to marginalize foreign sexuality, particularly foreign-language depictions of queer sexuality. However, today several economic factors directly related to the rise of home video have diminished foreign films' box office share to less than .5% and left it dependent on domestic distribution and thus prey to domestic censorship (Corliss 3).<sup>[13]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) In the past, foreign films relied on the U.S. art house and repertory circuit for most of their cinematic exposure, but these venues suffered terribly from the rise of the VCR and video rental outlets (Gomery 195, Wasser 135-137). Wheeler Winston Dixon claims that



“now [that] that circuit has shrunk to a few theaters in a few major metropolitan centers... foreign films no longer get international theatrical distribution” (357).[14]

Meanwhile most theater chains do not want to exhibit foreign films, because the average foreign-language release takes in less than \$1 million at the box office (Kaufman 1).[15] *New York Times* reporter Larry Rohter observes that

“since the mid-1980s, the centralization of cinema ownership in the hands of a few giant national chains, often affiliated with Hollywood studios, has resulted in fewer and fewer movies screened in more and more houses at the same time, ‘a situation that does not favor foreign-language films” (qtd. in Segrave 168).

For these reasons, even the majors’ specialty labels are reducing their involvement in foreign-language distribution. As fellow *New York Times* reporter Anthony Kaufman discovers, the

“Sony [Picture Classics] unit, in the past a mainstay of the foreign-language market, has cut its subtitled offerings to between one-half and one-third of its slate, down from two-thirds in the past” (1).

Sony’s decision reflects the poor gamble foreign-language films now represent to distributors, since, in the words of Meyer Gottlieb, the former president of Samuel Goldwyn Films,

“you have to throw a bomb at a paper to get them to pay attention to foreign films” (qtd. in Kaufman 1).

These dire box office trends might make home video seem like a perfect alternative to the high-cost, low-return ratio of foreign-language cinema, but in fact the video store may present an even more hostile environment for foreign productions. Richard Corliss claims that “foreign-films may be dying in theaters, but they are surviving, thriving, soaring on DVD” and cites the success of the Criterion Collection, the DVD distributor that used to be Janus Films, as an exemplum of niche marketing for foreign and art movies (4). However, Criterion regularly bolsters its bottom line with titles like *The Beastie Boys Video Anthology* (dir. Evan Bernard et. al., 2000), *Chasing Amy* (dir. Kevin Smith, 1997), and *The Rock* (dir. Michael Bay, 1996). More to the point, foreign-language videos simply do not rent well; currently, they make up less than six percent of Netflix’s annual rentals — and Netflix specifically sells itself to film connoisseurs (Kaufman 1, “About Netflix”). Other video outlets hesitate even to stock foreign-language movies. According to a recent study by Judith McCourt, the director of research for *Video Store Magazine*,

“the average video store dedicated just 1.2 percent of its space to foreign titles”(qtd. in Segrave 192).

Moreover, Blockbuster stores will not carry foreign-language videos unless they know the movies will be “recognized,” which requires

“having had a U.S. cinema release, magazine and/or newspaper

reviews, and famous actors” (Segrave 184).

Foreign productions thus find their U.S. economic prospects diminished as a result of a variety of industrial lobbies and consolidations; however, some foreign-language distributors specifically blame the Motion Picture Association of America for enabling this discrimination. In *Miramax Film Co. v. Motion Picture Association of America*, Judge Charles E. Ramos observes that CARA is “subject to the powerful economic forces at work within the industry,” and as a result its “rating system censors serious films by force of economic pressure” because “the negative economic impact of not obtaining a satisfactory rating is clear and severe” (*Miramax* 734, 732). *Miramax* concerns the particular rating (NC-17) given to one particular foreign film, Pedro Almodóvar’s *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (1990), and argues that the MPAA’s members studios abuse their connection with the North American Theater Owners’ Association to prevent adult, sexually-explicit, and foreign films from reaching most American theaters by unfairly awarding them financially unviable NC-17 ratings. As Jon Lewis explains, the studios believe that

“soft... American, box office friendly fare’ are the only movies they can make money in this consolidated marketplace, in large part because their major exhibitors prefer movies everyone can pay to see” (“Those” 26).

Thus the “MPAA’s best public relations gimmick,” as Jack Valenti once dubbed the rating system, solidifies an alliance between the theater conglomerates and the studios that protects the studios from outside competition and the theaters from films only some audiences will watch. Their mutual loyalty effectively bans adult material from U.S. cinemas, and that ban includes unrated films, since unrated films are often assumed to be X or NC-17 by any other name (Segrave 180). Furthermore, this censorious use of the rating system disproportionately marginalizes foreign productions, since foreign productions compose the majority of unrated films.[16] From 2001-2006, almost sixty-five percent of the unrated movies released in the U.S. were foreign-language films, and that number climbs to seventy-two percent if one includes English-language foreign films (“Unrated”).[17]

Kirby Dick’s recent documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006) challenges the MPAA’s effective embargo against unrated films, but Dick never mentions that the MPAA and its embargo are structured to protect U.S. filmmakers. Thus his project, although laudable, never investigates how the “unfamiliarity [that] breeds these NC-17s” might be related to unfamiliar tongues. Instead, his documentary, like Ramos’ decision, emphasizes the economic ramifications of independent filmmakers’ alleged freedom to distribute their films without an MPAA rating. Dick proves that unrated films suffer for defying CARA’s volunteerism, as indeed they must for CARA to ensure the visibility and monopoly of its rating system and its alleged control over the morality of motion pictures, but he is more interested in how the MPAA enforces suffering than in who suffers. That said, Dick does hit upon one of the most significant new truths of twenty-first century censorship during a brief interview with director John Waters when the director asserts,

“the worst censorship of all, I believe, is Wal-Mart, Blockbuster, all

the big chains.”

That is, the real problem for NC-17 films today is that these stores will not carry them and yet have the economic clout to determine which movies can succeed on video (and so succeed at all).

As Waters suggests, the MPAA’s control over U.S. movie distribution is tightest in the video rental and sell-through markets, since many video outlets shy away from carrying movies whose mere rating might alienate their clientele. As independent distributor James Schamus explains,

“we all know that Blockbuster, which is owned by Viacom, has a general policy of not carrying NC-17 films” (257).

Jon Lewis confirms,

“Blockbuster Video and Kmart won’t shelve NC-17 films” (“Those” 26).

Blockbuster pledged not to carry NC-17 titles shortly after the MPAA introduced the rating in January 1991, largely in response to

“protests by religious groups and a boycott by the American Family Association” (Sandler 76).

In fact, it even promised to destroy those NC-17 titles it had already bought (Wasko 155). This ban affected unrated/NC-17-by-association movies too, and even after Blockbuster resumed carrying unrated movies in 1994, it refused to make them available to all viewers. Instead it supplements the MPAA’s rating system with its own “Youth Restricted Viewing” program (“Blockbuster Reiterates”). Blockbuster attaches an “YRV” label to any NC-17 or unrated video and will not rent these movies to customers under eighteen years old without previous written permission from a parent or guardian. These movies are therefore less profitable for the store and so less widely stocked, less available to either children or adults. Because “Blockbuster controls nearly a third of the rental market” and has “accounted for nearly half of the studios’ rental income from new movies” since 1998, its YRV program effectively guarantees that unrated movies will be less profitable videos (Schamus 258, Epstein “Hollywood” 1).[18] And that, Schamus explains, is “how censorship works these days” (258).

Unrated videos do not fare any better in the sell-through market, moreover, because Blockbuster is also the number one sell-through outlet for DVDs. Since 1992, Blockbuster has been the top video retailer and, along with Kmart and Wal-Mart (who are also in the top four), it refuses to sell unrated and NC-17 videos (Wasko 156).[19] Their policies effectively prevent most adult-oriented movies from reaching most video buyers:

"In January 1991, the nation’s biggest retailer of videos, Blockbuster, announced that it would not carry movies designated for adults only (the chain later considered unrated movies on a case by case basis). By the end of 1992, K-Mart and Wal-Mart had also

refused to handle NC-17 films. These two outlets plus Blockbuster accounted for more than half of the videocassette sales in the United States." (Vaughn 220)

Today Wal-Mart contributes over \$5 billion to the \$20.9 billion the studios receive annually from home video sales, so its moral strictures have very real economic consequences for studios and filmmakers (Epstein "Sex" 1). Now that video revenues constitute fifty-eight percent of Hollywood's income, the video marketability of any given picture is essentially the most important factor in its financial outlook (Vaughn 257, Goldstein 1). Therefore, Jon Lewis may be right when he claims that "film censorship only incidentally and superficially regards specific film content" (*Hollywood* 2), but only because the studios care more about marketability. It is the video outlets and lobby groups who convince the MPAA that certain sexual content compromises marketability.

That said, it might only be a coincidence that *Y tu mamá también*'s castration severs its critique of neoliberalism and transnational corporatism, since, as Jon Lewis points out,

"the political and social utility of film censorship is altogether secondary to its economic function" (*Hollywood* 6).

"In Hollywood... the political is subsumed by or conflated with the economic," and therefore any given movie's censorship must primarily be understood as a financial decision meant to make it as profitable as possible for its distributor (Lewis *Hollywood* 7). In the case of *Y tu mamá también*, as Cuarón explains,

"many video stores won't take a movie that's not rated, so I had to make the movie an R" (Hirshberg 1).[20]

It would be easy here to accuse MGM and the MPAA of prudery and homophobia; Kirby Dick does so quite convincingly in *This Film is Not Yet Rated*. However, it might be more useful to return to Jon Lewis's observation that

"film censorship only incidentally and superficially regards specific film content" (*Hollywood* 2).

Neither the MPAA nor its member studios really care about homophobic boys having sex together, nor do they care about critiques of NAFTA or the Mexican government. Rather they wish to augment their products' positioning and playability, to satisfy Blockbuster and WalMart's requirements for family friendly products. In Hollywood, censorship is based on economics, and a new economy breeds new modes and methods of controlling or curtailing movie distribution. When VHS revenues overtook box office receipts in 1986, the movies' mode of transport changed, and it changed again in 1997 with the arrival of DVD. Video enables the studios to limit the release of sexually explicit foreign films whose very foreignness and political undercurrents hobble their market potential. Not all sex sells, in short, so sometimes censoring sex sells it better. By releasing two *Y tu mamá también*s, MGM and Blockbuster were able to profit off the notoriety of sex they did not have to show that included political implications they could now avoid promulgating. Thus neoliberalism is



not only the subject of *Y tu*'s (compromised) critique but also the economic force behind its video censorship. Just as NAFTA loosened the borders between Mexico and the U.S. (and Canada) "by changing the formal legal controls on the entry and exit of goods and capital, although notably not of people" (Saldaña-Portillo 753), the MPAA's video policy turned *Y tu mamá también* into a better commodity by limiting the movements of its characters.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### Notes

[1] While some videos carry the disclaimer, “This movie has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to fit your screen,” announcements about content loss are nowhere near as systemic, either on home video or in TV broadcasting or airplane programming. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

[2] *Mestizaje* originally referred to “miscegenation or cultural mixture as the basis for conceiving a homogenous national identity out of a heterogeneous population” (de Castre qtd. in Pérez-Torres 5). As Maria Josephine Saldaña-Portillo explains,

“In early-twentieth-century Mexico, the discourse of *mestizaje* was deployed as a strategy of national identification and unification in the aftermath of a divisive revolutionary war against the oligarchic class of the *porfiriato*.... The nineteenth century discourse of *mestizaje* was perfectly adaptable to such twentieth-century revolutionary aspirations because it not only metaphorized national unity for Mexico through biological coordinates but also interpellated subjects into a principle of citizenship based on a leaving behind of residual indigenous *and* imperial racial categories and cultures” (762).

Today many Chicano theorists and artists use *mestizaje* as a metaphor and call for a radical politics that can recognize the colonized history of Latin America while also connoting a trope of mixture, border identification, and hybridity in gender, class, and sexual orientation as well as race (Pérez-Torres xiv). Thus *mestizaje* now implies social incorporation, including sexual union across class divisions (as in *Y tu mamá también*).

[3] For a more detailed history of Mexican cinema, its allegorical tradition of social critique, and its role in the creation of a post-Revolution national identity in Mexico, see Hector Dominguez-Ruvalcaba, Carlos Bonfil, Carlos Monsiváis, Susan Dever, and Andrea Noble. Dominguez-Ruvalcaba provides a particularly thorough unpacking of the allegorical significance of *Maria Candelaria* and the *comedia ranchera* genres in the formations of Mexico’s secularized patriarchal culture (78-86), while Noble historicizes the original exigencies behind allegorical cinema in the national mythologizing of the Mexican Revolution (53).

[4] For an historical exegesis of Mexican neoliberalism, see Manuel Pastor and Carol Wise’s “The Origins and Sustainability of Mexico’s Free Trade Policy” and “State Policy, Distribution, and Neoliberal Reform in Mexico.” As Wise and Pastor explain, Mexico began to liberalize its international trade licenses in the mid-1970s, replacing them with tariffs which were gradually lowered through the mid-1980s as many state functions (such as banks and other lending programs) were privatized

and agricultural subsidies reduced (“Origins” 460-462; “State Policy” 422, 429, 440-442). These changes paved the way for NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Area, a trade bloc composed of the United States, Canada, and Mexico that was brought into effect on January 1, 1994 by the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The NAFTA treaty reduces tariffs on goods traveling between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, as well as extending copyright domain. It thus expands opportunities for North American businesses to sell their goods for more money in more markets and produce their goods for less money in cheaper markets, in part by removing the previous import tariffs between Mexico and the U.S. and outlawing “subsidies explicitly used to protect domestic products and markets from the foreign competition” (Saldaña-Portillo 753). Trade liberalizations like NAFTA thus ease the flow of capital across international borders, but they rarely improve labor conditions and have historically had detrimental effects on the lives of working class and subaltern North Americans, especially in Mexico. Incidentally, Wal-Mart is both the fourth largest video retailer in the U.S. and arguably one of the biggest beneficiaries of NAFTA’s trade liberalizations (Epstein “Sex” 1, Juhasz, Hill 518).

[5] Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz has an altogether different reading of Luisa in which she “ultimately is offered as a kind of sacrificial body” (41, 47). I would argue that Luisa demonstrates too much agency and self-determination to be dismissed as anyone’s sacrifice, even her own; however, Acevedo-Muñoz’s investigation of Cuarón’s interest in the Malinche myth is provocative and worth considering.

[6] For an exemplum of Cuarón’s critique of narrative qua solipsism, see *Children of Men* (2006). In this movie, the camera only indulges in one look away, when it temporarily abandons Theo and Kee as they flee a refugee camp battle. The camera abandons its protagonists to attend to the grief of an anonymous mother whose son was just killed by a stray bullet. It is a dramatic gesture that asks, “Why would you think their story was more important than anyone else’s?”

[7] Indeed, sex and sexual tension seems previously to have held the boys’ friendship together even when class prejudices threaten to overwhelm it. Thus although the narrator informs us that Tenoch uses his foot to touch the toilet at Julio’s house and Julio always lights matches after defecating at Tenoch’s, we see that they are able to translate their scatological embarrassment into mutually amusing fart jokes.

[8] The Hays Code refers to the Production Code that the MPAA used to govern potentially offensive or controversial subject matter in films distributed in the U.S. from 1934 to 1968. Named for its author and the first president of the MPAA, William H. Hays, the Hays Code established a Production Code Administration to approve films for U.S. distribution and guide filmmakers towards acceptable depictions of taboo subjects, like sex.

[9] For example, the boys’ naked swimming contest is not only shortened to avoid shots of the boys’ penises, but the water also appears to have been digitally enhanced, made murkier, to obscure their genitalia. To be fair, I should also mention that the R-rated *Y tu* does replace Julio and Ceci’s sex scene with an off-screen hand job while the teenagers are enroute to the airport. Perhaps ironically, this exchange accompanies the unrated *Y tu* as a “deleted scene.” [[return to page 2 of essay](#)]

[10] As Baer and Long explain, the film's narrative moment can be determined from its denouement: "The penultimate voice-over segment finally states that the ruling party (the PRI) lost for the first time in seventy-one years the following summer [i.e. in 2000], thereby confirming that the narrative time of the film has been the summer of 1999" (161).

[11] The film focuses on the various gifts the travelers receive from less fortunate characters, including a hat Julio accepts from his mechanic and the stuffed mouse Luisa takes from Doña Martina. They are never seen giving gifts in return.

[12] Since the narrator only adds that "Julio ran into Tenoch on his way to the dentist" *after* they run into each other, PAN's victory stands in the place of a description of their meeting or the upheaval in their friendship. Such observations are not readily available to U.S. viewers, however, because the subtitles literally write over Tenoch and Julio in the establishing shot of the Mexico City intersection where they meet. I saw the film almost a dozen times before I noticed them.

[13] Previous scholarship on the history of international film exhibition in the U.S. (including its censorship) is too rich and complex for me to summarize here. For more on early cinematic nationalism, see Abel; for a history of foreign film distribution in the U.S., see Segrave; for an analysis of Hollywood's attack on foreign competitors, see Thompson; and for a historical reading of how distribution plans affected early industry policy, see Vasey. [[return to page 3 of essay](#)]

[14] Barbara Wilinsky objects to such generalized death knells and argues that the art house is transitioning, not dying (135-136). While I would like to share her optimism, all of her anecdotal evidence comes from the major metropolitan centers known as the last bastions of art house cinema.

[15] By comparison, the highest grossing film of 2007 was Sam Raimi's *Spider-man 3*, which earned over \$336 million in the U.S., while the highest grossing foreign-language film was Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*, with just over \$11 million ("Yearly Box Office").

[16] I say "films," because the MPAA handles unrated DVDs, especially English-language unrated DVDs, quite differently, as I will go on to explain. Furthermore, the studios as a rule do not release their statistics on video rental or sales, so one must turn to box office receipts to study unrated movie releases in the United States.

[17] For more statistics on unrated film releases in the U.S. from 2001 to 2006, see appendix A.

[18] Netflix, by way of comparison, can only boast 5.7 million households to Blockbuster's 50 million, while the next runner up, Movie Gallery, has a mere 3,500 stores in the U.S. and Canada ("About Netflix," Roberts 1, "About Movie Gallery").

[19] The studios technically should not release unrated DVDs, since according to their agreement with the MPAA, they must "voluntarily" submit all of their motion pictures, even their trailers and television ads, for an MPAA rating (Goldstein 1). The MPAA is a studio organization, however, and so, according to *Los Angeles Times* reporter Patrick Goldstein, it



“has taken a see-no-evil, hear-no-evil approach to the video marketplace. Former MPAA chief Jack Valenti, who still oversees the ratings board, has said that as long as the packaging is honest, he has no problem with unrated movies” (1).

These DVDs become “unrated” by featuring material that was “not submitted for the MPAA’s approval,” but that material can arrive either as part of the formerly-rated movie or a special feature (Levin 1). As for the chain stores, they now accept unrated editions of previously-rated movies

“as long as [the stores] are assured by studios that the videos would be rated R if they had received a rating” (Goldstein 1).

This claim is even true occasionally, as in cases like *Wedding Crashers: Uncorked*, but it still belies the advertising that accounts for the popularity of these editions—and thus the very reason that stores like Wal-Mart want to carry them.

[20] You might be wondering whether Cuarón “had to” cut *Y tu* to get U.S. distribution for his film, and the answer, in short, is yes. The distribution history that led to *Y tu*’s video censorship began on the festival circuit, at the Cannes Film Festival, where, in 2001, “the Mexican-made movie was shown almost furtively to distributors” (Bart 1). At that time, it was passed over by a series of “studio-based classics labels... because they feared it would get an NC-17 rating and anger their corporate parents” (Lyons 1). The MPAA members did not want the film, in other words, because they would have to submit it to CARA and accept CARA’s rating. “The acquisitions chief of one mini-major” even admitted to *Variety* reporter Peter Bart, “I loved the movie, but my company won’t go near it because of the ratings problem” (1).

In the end, the independent distributor IFC Films picked up *Y tu* for just over \$1 million with money that its parent company, Rainbow Media, recently acquired from a twenty percent buyout by MGM (Dioro 1, Herrick 1). IFC’s Senior Vice President of Marketing and Distribution, Bob Berney, then took the film to the MPAA to see if he could secure an R-rating. However, IFC, Cuarón, and possibly even the MPAA agreed that the cuts necessary for an R-rating damaged the film’s artistry and humor, and so IFC, since it is an independent distributor and can reject ratings, rejected *Y tu*’s NC-17 and released the film unrated to U.S. theaters (Bart 1, O’Kasick 1, Williams 1).

When it came time to distribute *Y tu mamá también* on video, the movie’s video rights had already been promised to MGM as part of the studio’s stake in Rainbow Media, a deal which was announced publicly in *Variety* in May, 2002 (Dioro 1). However, MPAA members cannot technically release a movie on video without an MPAA rating; as “an MGM/UA spokesperson who wished to go unnamed” explained to Twin Cities CityPages reporter Jeremy O’Kasick, “If a film is unrated before release on home video, major distributors must first submit an edited version to the MPAA” (1).

Here the euphemism “edited version” implies that the studios do not want to (and will not) release an NC-17 movie that the video chains will not take. Thus Cuarón used the guidelines he received from his initial, pre-theatrical encounter with the MPAA to edit together an R-rated version of *Y tu mamá también* so that MGM could

get the movie into Blockbuster, Kmart, and Wal-Mart (O’Kasick 1). Then, through the same MPAA loophole that allows studios to release unrated domestic DVDs, MGM also distributed the original, theatrically released *Y tu mamá también* as a “special edition.” The “special edition” of *Y tu* qualifies as previously “unrated” because it includes a short by Carlos Cuarón, a making-of documentary, and a commentary track that are not part of the movie as it was submitted to the MPAA, but it also just so happens to contain the original version of *Y tu mamá también*.

Incidentally, Cuarón also prepared a “PG” version of *Y tu* which is included a bonus on the Zone 2 and Zone 4 DVD of the movie. It is a mere ten minutes long and contains only four words of dialogue (“Alternate Versions”)

## Appendix A — Top Twenty Highest Grossing MPAA-Unrated Films by Format, Production, and Language: 2001-2006

	35mm	35mm	35mm	35mm	IMAX
	Foreign, Eng.-Lang.	Foreign, For.-Lang.	Domestic, Eng.-Lang.	# of 35mm in Top 20	All U.S., Eng.-Lang
2001	0	9	7	16	4
2002	0	14	3	17	3
2003	1	11	6	17	3
2004	2	10	7	19	1
2005	2	10	5	17	3
2006	3	14	2	19	1
2001-2006	8	68	30	105	15
Total # of Movies Studied	120				
Total # of 35mm Movies Studied	105		Including Imax		
% of Unrated 35mm For.-Lang.	64.76		% For.-Lang.	56.67	
% of Unrated 35mm For., Eng.-Lang.	7.62		% For., Eng.-Lang.	6.67	
% of Unrated 35mm For., Any Lang	72.38		% For., Any Lang	63.34	
% of Unrated 35mm Domestic, Eng.-Lang.	28.57		% Domestic, Eng.-Lang.	37.5	

Almost 65% of the top-twenty unrated movies released theatrically in the U.S. from 2001-2006 were foreign productions in a foreign-language. Including English-language foreign productions (from Canada, New Zealand, or the United Kingdom), just over 72% of the top twenty unrated movies released theatrically in the U.S. were

foreign productions. Even if you include Imax movies and do not include foreign, English-language productions, almost 57% of the unrated films released theatrically in the U.S. from 2001-2006 were foreign-language features. Therefore, the vast majority of the unrated films released to U.S. theaters are foreign-language films.

## Works cited

Abel, Richard. *The Red Rooster Scare: Making American Cinema, 1900-1910*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1999.

"About Netflix." *Netflix*. 12 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.netflix.com/MediaCenter?id=5379>>.

"About Movie Gallery." *\_Movie Gallery*. 28 June 2008  
<<http://www.moviegallery.com/company/about.aspx>>.

Acevedo-Muñoz, Ernesto R. "Sex, Class, and Mexico in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*." *Film and History* 34.1 (2004): 39-48.

"Alternate Versions for *Y tu mamá también*." *The Internet Movie Database*. 14 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0245574/alternateversions>>.

Baer, Hester and Ryan Long. "Transnational Cinema and the Mexican State in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*." *South Central Review* 21.3 (Fall 2004): 150-168.

Bart, Peter. "'Mama' Success Circumvents NC-17 Stigma." *Variety.com* 7 April 2002. 1 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117865016.html?categoryid=1&cs=1&query=%22y+tu+mama+tambien%22>>.

*The Beastie Boys Video Anthology*. Dir. Evan Bernard et. al. DVD. Criterion, 2000.

"Blockbuster® Reiterates Decade-Old Youth Restricted Viewing® Program," press release 19 Dec. 2001. 1 Feb. 2001

Bonfil, Carlos and Carlos Monsiváis. *A traves del espejo: El cine mexicano y su público*. Mexico City: Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1994.

*Chasing Amy*. Dir. Kevin Smith. 1997. DVD. Criterion, 2000.

*Children of Men*. Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. Universal, 2006.

Corliss, Richard. "The Heyday of Foreign Films." *Time* 10 Nov. 2006. 1 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1557886-1,00.html>>.

Cuarón, Alfonso. Interview. "Live Global Fan Summit with Alfonso Cuarón." *Amazon.com*. 10 August 2002

Dever, Susan. *Celluloid Nationalism and Other Melodramas: From Post-Revolutionary Mexico to Fin de Siglo Mexamerica*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003.

Dioro, Carl. "Unrated 'Mama' Rates with Auds: Spanish Lingo Pic Makes Indie Scene Splash." *Variety.com* 26 March 2002. 12 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117864421.html?categoryid=13&cs=1&query=%22y+tu+mama+tambien%22>>.

Dixon, Wheeler Winston. "Twenty-Five Reasons Why It's All Over." *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*. Ed. Jon Lewis. New York: New York UP, 2001. 356-366.

Domínguez- Ruvalcaba, Hector. *Modernity and the Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity: From Sensuality to Bloodshed*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.

Epstein, Edward Jay. "Hollywood's New Zombie: The Last Days of Blockbuster." *State* 9 Jan. 2006. 1 Feb. 2007

------. "Sex and the Cinema: In the New Hollywood, It's a Liability." 15 Aug. 2005. 1 Feb. 2007  
< <http://www.slate.com/id/2124498/>>.

Goldstein, Patrick. "Unrated DVD's Popularity Revives the R-Rated Comedy." *Los Angeles Times* 10 July 2005. 1 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05191/534528.stm>>.

Gomery, Douglas. *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*. For. David Bordwell. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin Press, 1992.

Herrick, Scott. "MGM, IFC Sign Deal." *Variety.com* 22 May 2002. 1 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117867435.html?categoryid=20&cs=1&query=%22y+tu+mama+tambien%22>>.

Hill, Charles. "Wal-Mart's Mexican Adventure." *Strategic Management*. Eds. Charles W. L. Hill and Gareth R. Jones. 6th Ed. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Hirschberg, Lynn. "The Way We Live Now: Questions for Alfonso Cuarón." *New York Times Magazine* 23 March 2003: 15.

Juhasz, Antonia. "What Wal-Mart Wants from the WTO." *AlterNet* 13 Dec. 2005. 30 Nov. 2008

Kaufman, Anthony. "Is Foreign Film the New Endangered Species?" *New York Times* 22 Jan. 2006. 1 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/movies/22kauf.html?ex=1295586000&en=e460cfdeed661cbo&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>>.

Klinger, Barbara. *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*. Berkeley: U. of California, 2006.

Lewis, Jon. *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry*. New York: New York UP, 2000.



-----, "Those Who Disagree Can Kiss Jack Valenti's Ass." *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*. Ed. Jon Lewis. New York: New York UP, 2001. 23-32.

*The Lives of Others*. Dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. Sony Pictures Classics, 2007.

Lyons, Charles. "Darwinist Dilemmas: Evolving Distributors Bank on Creative Financing, Risky Fare." *Variety.com* 28 July 2002. 1 Feb. 2007  
<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117870371.html?cs=1&query=%22y+tu+mama+tambien%22>

Miramax Film Co. et. al. v. Motion Picture Association of America. No. 11446/90. Supreme Court of New York. 19 July 1990.

Monsiváis, Carlos. "All the People Came and Did Not Fit onto the Screen: Notes on the Cinema Audience in Mexico." *Mexican Cinema*. Ed. Paul Antonio Paranaguá. Trans. Anna M. López. London: BFI, 1995. 145-151.

Noble, Andrea. *Mexican National Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

O'Kasick, Jeremy. "Mamá Said Cut It Out." *CityPages* 24.1159 (19 Feb. 2003). 1 Feb. 2007

Pastor, Manuel and Carol Wise. "The Origins and Sustainability of Mexico's Free Trade Policy." *International Organization* 48:3 (Summer 1994): 459-489.

-----, "State Policy, Distribution, and Neoliberal Reform in Mexico." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 29:2 (May 1997): 419-456.

Pérez-Torres, Rafael. *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Roberts, Johnnie L. "Chips off the Block." *Newsweek* 20 Feb. 1995. 30 Nov. 2008  
<<http://www.newsweek.com/id/106494/output/print>>.

*The Rock*. Dir. Michael Bay. 1996. DVD. Criterion, 2001.

Saldaña-Portillo, María Josephina. "In the Shadow of NAFTA: *Y tu mamá también* Revisits the National Allegory of Mexican Sovereignty." *American Quarterly* 57.3 (Sept. 2005): 751-777.

Sandler, Kevin. "The Naked Truth: *Showgirls* and the Fate of the X/NC-17 Rating." *Cinema Journal* 40:3 (Spring 2001): 69-93.

Schamus, James. "A Rant." *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*. Ed. Jon Lewis. New York: New York UP, 2001. 253-260.

Segrave, Kerry. *Foreign Films in America: A History*. Jefferson, NC.: McFarland, 2004.

Silverman, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington, IN.: Indiana UP, 1988.

*Spider-man 3*. Dir. Sam Raimi. Columbia Pictures, 2007.

Stam, Robert. "Beyond Third Cinema: The Aesthetics of Hybridity." *Rethinking Third Cinema*. Ed. Anthony Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake. New York: Routledge, 2003. 31-48.

Tashiro, Charles. "Videophilia: What Happens When You Wait for it on Video." *Film Quarterly* 45.1 (1991): 7-17.

*This Film Is Not Yet Rated*. Dir. Kirby Dick. 2006. DVD. Red Envelope, 2007.

Thompson, Kristin. *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907-1934*. London: British Film Institute, 1985.

"Unrated: Yearly Box Office by MPAA Rating: 2001-2006." *Box Office Mojo*. 14 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/mpaarating.htm?yr=2006&rating=Unrated&view=releasedate&sort=gross&order=DESC&p=.htm>>.

Vasey, Ruth. *The World According to Hollywood: 1918-1939*. Madison, WI.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

Vaughn, Stephen. *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006.

Wasko, Janet. *Hollywood in the Information Age: Beyond the Silver Screen*. Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1994.

Wasser, Frederick. *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*. Austin: U. of Texas Press, 2001.

*Wedding Crashers: Uncorked*. Dir. David Dobkin. Unrated Ed. DVD. New Line, 2005.

Wilinsky, Barbara. *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema*. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Williams, Phillip. "From Mexico to Hollywood and Back: Writer-Director Alfonso Cuarón Discusses *Y tu mamá también*." *Movie Maker* 11. 1 Feb. 2007  
<[http://www.moviemaker.com/directing/article/from\\_mexico\\_to\\_hollywood\\_and\\_back\\_2792/](http://www.moviemaker.com/directing/article/from_mexico_to_hollywood_and_back_2792/)>.

*Y tu mamá también*. Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. 2001. R-rated Ed. DVD. MGM, 2002.

-----, Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. 2001. Special Ed. DVD. MGM, 2002.

"Yearly Box Office: 2007 Domestic Grosses." *Box Office Mojo*. 12 Feb. 2007  
<<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2007&p=.htm>>.

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Torture, maternity, and truth in Jasmila Zbanic's *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams*

by [Caroline Koebel](#)



Sara (Luna Mijovic) is part of the gaps and gapes of postwar Sarajevo.



An existential crisis: who am I, or prove to me I am here.

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind —"  
— Emily Dickinson[1]  
[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

"People don't want to hear the bad news. Perhaps they never do. But in the case of Bosnia the indifference, the lack of effort to try to imagine, was more acute than I ever anticipated."  
— Susan Sontag[2]

Set some ten years into the aftermath of Slobodan Milosevic's onslaught in former Yugoslavia, Jasmila Zbanic's *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams* (2005)[3] does not examine how Esma (Mirjana Karanovic), the narrative's protagonist, coped with life in a prisoner of war camp for Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks).

"My belly grew. With her inside. Even then they came....In twos, threes, every day."[4]



Esma (Mirjana Karanovic) places words onto her previously unspoken trauma of rape while in a prisoner of war camp.



A co-worker, Jabolka (Malke Höhne), gleans information about her background from Esma's name.

It does not account for how she was able to sustain herself day after day of multiple gang rapes, to continue indefinitely, and lasting well into her pregnancy with the "bastard Chetnik"[5] daughter to whom she eventually gave birth. It does not detail Esma's liberation from the camp. Rather, *Grbavica* follows Esma as mother of a now pubescent daughter as she confronts her





Pelda (Leon Lucev) still searches for his father's body.

struggle to exist in the present. The film proposes that for Esma to have the possibility of a future, she must speak the truth of her past in all its inexorable trauma. And in the process, the film hoes the battleground between ethics and truth.

Should a mother protect her child from knowledge of its identity as product of rape by the enemy? How does deceit once conceived take on a life of its own? Can internal conflict be represented so as to evoke sympathy while resisting sentimentality and sensationalism?



War-torn façade and a child sprung from war, Sara, in Mickey Mouse shirt.



The young hang out among architectural remains.

Sarajevo, the city housing the once-internment camp neighborhood of Grbavica and the land “to which all roads return,” contextualizes Esma’s agony. It is riddled by tension between the living and the deceased, between peacetime and war, presence and absence, as evinced in details such as the small number of classmates attending the school reunion or derelict buildings become war monuments or ongoing exhumations of mass graves.



Transcendent music and sumptuous textiles envelop the survivors.

Sound of song: voice and melody so supreme that they transfix even beyond the language gap (Zbanic opts not to subtitle here). This solitary music unifies the scene of a group of women in repose atop a brilliantly colored and patterned handwoven carpet, themselves creating a fabric at once formless and structured, random and coherent, asymmetric and balanced. With the ease and sprightliness of Peter Pan’s Tinkerbell, the camera[6] weaves amongst the trauma survivors at the Women’s Center, the noninvasive optical inquisitiveness part of the scene’s composite harmony. All eyes closed, the listeners — from a sole hand against the sumptuous textile, through hands resting on knees and other parts of the body, to hands holding faces tilted earthward, sunward, bent to the side, to a close-up on one figure — are within themselves. In synchrony with the camera’s slow and steady movement towards her, one woman opens her eyes and concentrates her gaze outward. It’s as if inner knowledge has reawakened her to the external world, or conversely, as if she has strengthened her resolve to hide parts of herself from others, in particular from her daughter (as the spectator soon learns).



The clustering of bodies echoes



The moving camera flows between



Esma's eye contact with the spectator separates her from the others.

images of mass graves.

the individual and the collective.

The introduction's actionlessness belies the complex challenge to the spectator it constructs: to elicit empathy with the opening-eye woman, Esma, from a distance that does not flatten the character into a single-dimensional victim. In a paradox of vision, a certain blindness enables truth seeking. Of Bosnia, Sontag has written,

"Of course, it is easy to turn your eyes from what is happening if it is not happening to *you*. Or if you have not put yourself where it is happening."<sup>[7]</sup>

*Grbavica's* fictive experience (and characters) facilitates those viewers far removed from rape camps and genocide in imagining firstly such atrocities and secondly the existence today of individuals who have sustained them. The film makes palpable how living in the present and possessing the future after enduring extreme cruelty is a matter of process and fluidity.

Granted Esma's lack of *joie de vivre* as demonstrated by her (depressive) body language, *Grbavica* otherwise keeps physical marks of Esma's secret to a minimum (at her nightclub job she pops pills when others' sexual play is overly explicit and a shot of her undressing reveals scars crisscrossing her back). The most profound sign of Esma's captive past is Sara (Luna Mijovic) — at once material proof of torture and source of what vitality she possesses. Wracking Esma's nerves as her daughter ages is not so much that the offspring functions as evidence of trauma, but that one day increasingly close she will force a confession.

Sara seeks truth and her first general and then acute sense that her mother monitors this ideal is one of the film's key examples of a return (to self, to place, to origins) precipitated by advancement. Sara's truth-seeking leads her outward, amidst alien territory, away from the maternal, towards the horrific. In pursuit of the grisly yet inescapable truth of her conception, Sara concurrently experiences an inverse movement, one bringing her back to self. As evinced by a popular song, Sarajevo itself forms an identity map for Sara:

"Whenever I wander, I dream of you  
All roads lead me back to you  
I wait with much longing to see your lights  
Sarajevo my love."



Esma gets a job as a waitress at Club Amerika.



A soldier and Esma's co-worker dance.



Sara recedes into her city.



Sara and Samir (Kenan Catic) experience first love.

Finding Esma asleep, Sara gently covers her mother's hand with her own. Tight framing emphasizes their merger. The calm segues into an alert Esma, who — clutching the pillow upon which she had just been resting her head — chases her daughter through the apartment. The loose mix of shots accompanied by the sound of laughter — the scene's light tone — implies that the pillow fight is an oft-rehearsed ritual and an assurance that all will go according to script. When



Esma and Sara pillow fight.



Laughter.



Esma caught beneath her daughter.

This exchange exemplifies how Zbanic scrutinizes the present for vestiges of the past, and how she conveys Esma's experience through an examination of signs of trauma and torture rather than through a representation of the acts themselves. Resisting the sensationalism and neat causality of flashbacks as plot device, Zbanic instead challenges the spectator to form a picture out of fragments, to visualize of her own accord, truth. Read as marker of the past this scene provokes and disturbs. The daughter, in overpowering mother, temporarily (and liminally) moves into position as father. Learning from the film as a whole, the spectator is able to see with hindsight that in Sara's eyes, "he" is a Shaheed,[8] a martyr, her mythical parent, while for Esma, "he" is the many who multiply raped her.



Sara defends her father's honor.



"Hair." Sara asks how she resembles her father.



Sara relishes some kind of genetic identification with her father.

At Sara's demand to learn what she has from her father (a man not referred to by name), Esma finally concedes that she has inherited "her father's hair." Actually, Sara's hair resembles her mother's, while it is their eyes (blue v. brown) which differ greatly. In manufacturing this genetic feature, Esma buys herself time. Fitting that the scene is at a shopping mall; Sara is placated by the small yet symbolic act of consumption, but the fulfillment of her desire is short-lived. The return of her restlessness — her pursuit of something at once intangible and absolute — is near immediate. Sara's object of desire, what she anticipates as the concrete destination of her quest, is a state-issued certificate proving the status of her father as a martyr killed in defense of Sarajevo. She needs the death certificate for discounted passage on a school trip (the key circumstance that propels the narrative).

The document is intended by Esma to on one hand provide evidence for a worthy heritage to Sara and on the other conceal the tragic reality of her



Stockinged limbs and lingerie:

metaphor, analysis, symbolism?

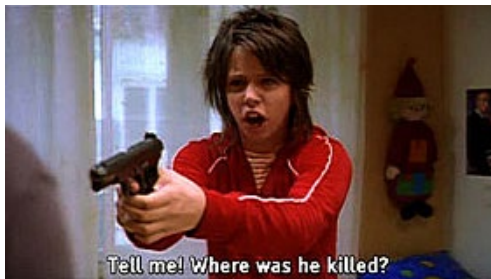
conception. The document does not exist and has never existed and it is the idea, or the mental picture, of the document that is so meaningful in shaping truth and self-identity. It is a father substitute and more. The death certificate phenomenon in its mutually negating states of absence and presence is analogous to Esma's greater dissociative relationship to the past. Sara's search for self is encircled by Esma's own re-emergence from fossilization in time.

Informed by the pillow-fight-made-weighty scene early on in the diegesis, mother and daughter in a late scene once again disturb the balance of power between parent and child through a physical and emotional battle of strengths. Here in the film's climax the scales of ethics and truth crash as Esma finally and decisively aborts the deceit she has carried forth. Incensed by Sara threatening her at gunpoint for "the truth," Esma knocks the weapon away and throws the girl down on the bed — overpowering Sara in an aftershock of how she herself was forced into submission. "You want the truth!" An over the shoulder shot inverts the position of the two in the earlier scene. Rather than studying Esma, the camera, close-up on her face, observes Sara, whose eyes look up at her mother's, brow wrinkled, mouth agape. Esma explodes,



The daughter re-posit(ion)s her mother as whore.

"They raped me. In the prisoner of war camp. And you were born there!"



A gun usurps a clown doll and other remnants of childhood.



Esma uncoils and in anger blurts out the truth.



Shot foregrounds Sara's reaction to the damning news of her conception.

[Go to page 2](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Is the space between parent and child collapsing or expanding?

In the next shot, a medium profile of the two, Esma pins Sara while Sara grasps Esma's shoulders and the interlocked couple form a circle, creating ambivalence as they seem to move at once apart and closer. Occupying the aggressor's role, Esma, against a mute Christina Aguilera background image, screams,

"You're a Chetnick bastard!"

The *mise en scène* emphasizes the transitional nature of Sara's adolescence. While she wields guns and encounters boys and in effect intermixes the two (Sara's weapon belonged to her boyfriend's dad, a real Shaheed), Sara is ensconced by a world of pop stars.[9][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Moons and suns illuminate a beatific bedspread. "The truth" in this blasted cosmos is anything but pacific. Sara curls into fetal position, her reality turned inside out.



Gun (= power to destroy) is Samir's inheritance from his Shaheed father.



Sara retreats.

The patter of rain links Sara's bedroom as harrowing site of truth with the now familiar Womens' Center as place of vocal unfurling of Esma's self-revelation (accepting that the time has arrived for truth to be told, she tells the story of her agony). In contrast with *Grbavica*'s opening, the first shot in this subsequent survivors support group scene is of a woman singing (earlier Hasiba Agic was heard, but not visually identified). In addition now her song, unlike before, is translated:



Hasiba Agic.

"When the blossoms are blooming  
When the world is in repose  
The soul aches with yearning  
We parted long ago."

The camera again meditates on the individual parts comprising the whole (note the tripling of the scene's length) but instead of eyes closed as they listen, the women of diverse age and appearance are mostly open-eyed. Several figures in headscarves provide rare occurrences of reference to Islam (underscoring the largely secular lifestyle of multiethnic pre-war Sarajevo).

"These roses red  
Are flushed with crimson  
Blood and tears remain  
To dying hearts  
This heaven above us  
Is but a shadowy veil...."





Only some Islamic women cover their hair.

The majestic sound of the singer, as in the beginning, creates a sense of unity amidst the listeners.

“When our tears melt away  
Even the desert can bloom  
In a vision of paradise....”

At this point, the translation stops, but to unlearned ears the singer seems to repeat, “Allah.”[10]

Acknowledging the Bosnian Muslim females whose husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers disappeared without trace or (re) materialized in mass graves, or who themselves were subjected to captivity, torture, and rape in the terror of former Yugoslavia, it takes scant effort not only to associate the women pictured here as survivors and mourners within the diegesis of *Grbavica*, but also to read them metafilmically as extras who in actuality play themselves.[11]. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Sontag reminds,

“Our failure is one of imagination, of empathy; we have failed to hold this reality in mind.”[12]

With the extent of the ravages of Sarajevo and its people, these women in any case cannot be far removed by experience from who they perform.

Zbanic proffers a fictive cinematic construct to open stranger’s eyes (yours and mine), to focus the truth of Sarajevo within a collective scope of vision. She adds credence to such a reading by locating the narrative in time contiguous with factual reality. At one point in *Grbavica*’s diegesis there is background sound (untranslated) of a news broadcast of Sontag’s death, which orients the film within the timeframe of December 2004.[13]. The sense of *Grbavica* happening in historical time is heightened by the awareness of the fact that children conceived during the Siege of Sarajevo (beginning in 1992) are just becoming pubescent at this moment.

In an echo of the original scene at the Women’s Center, the camera again finds and settles on Esma who, rather than opening her eyes in relation to the focus on her, now looks down, her gaze averted. The rain that continues from the previous few scenes envelops the tears she sheds, in addition to having foreshadowed her crying.

Cut to Sara looking at herself in the mirror, the camera behind, sharing her inquiry into image of self. Once daughter finally learns in “the truth” scene that the incontestable proof of her heritage, the certificate (only ink on paper after all), is her mother’s invention, she attacks the part of herself Esma has identified as her father’s: her hair. In shaving her head, Sara symbolically discards her paternity. This auto-destructive act (which, it should be noted, ultimately enables an affirmation of self) has broad resonance given that hair is cross-culturally recognized as a mark and symbol of feminine shame (and beauty and power).

Sara’s cutting is reminiscent of Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) [14], when the French woman from Never’s hair is shorn by local authorities in punishment for her love affair with the German soldier. She rekindles this past for her Japanese lover,



“This heaven above us.”



Remote control in hand, Esma pauses on news of Sontag’s death.



Esma at the Women’s Center, her tears and rainfall emblematic of a new season.

“They shave my head carefully till they’re finished. They think it’s their duty to do a good job shaving the women’s heads.”[15]

In the appendix to her screenplay, the film’s writer Marguerite Duras adds,

“What remains of Riva, on this quay, is the beating of her heart. (Late in the afternoon it has rained. It has rained on Riva and on the city. Then the rain has stopped. Then Riva’s head has been shaved...).”[16]

It is curious to observe the place of rain (and its attendant associations of cleansing and quenching) in relation to the hair scenes of both films.



Is Sara trapped by her own reflection?



Sara moults her identity.



Sara’s hair will return with her new knowledge of its significance.



A woman on the bus observes Esma with one eye.

Especially in light of Sara’s subsequent action, it is possible to imagine that the earlier shopping mall exchange was another attempt by Esma to safeguard her daughter. Recall that she averted the obvious: Sara’s eyes as referent of difference between them. Esma’s construction of an alternate truth by using the synecdoche of hair and not eyes to connect child to parent is prescient of Sara’s violence against self. Hair is a more resilient (and regenerative) target than eyes. Simultaneously, because the observant viewer notes already that Esma means “eyes” when she speaks “hair,” the ridding of the hair has slippage with the gouging of the eyes. And the mythological-psychoanalytic-oedipal significance is at least sensed if not subjected to analysis. In effect, sight (or rather the potential of vision) must be preserved at all entanglements with truth.

Cut back to Esma at the Women’s Center, keeping gaze averted from camera, now talking:

“And when they brought her, she was so tiny. And she was so beautiful. I had already forgotten there was anything beautiful in this world.”



“I had already forgotten there was anything beautiful in this world.”

She explains to the group that first she had tried to miscarry, then to reject the child, but that upon hearing her daughter’s cries through the wall her milk began to flow and she consented to a single nursing. It was this union that startled Esma into a re-embracing of the world, albeit partial and notwithstanding her disempowered reality within it. Years later in a classic feminist and postcolonial trope, Esma has arrived at “voice” with her new capacity to locate her horrors within language. Recall from earlier in this writing:

“My belly grew. With her inside. Even then they came....In twos, threes, every day.”

Esma is a speaking subject. Her story can be known not exclusively through watching and examining her — through objectification — but through her own version of events. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous discloses the crucial role such expression plays in the oppressed subject’s general animation,



Esma is now able to locate her horrors within language.

"By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display — the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time." [17]



Pelda and Esma reminisce about student days while picnicking on a hill overlooking Sarajevo. It is this very geography that made the city so vulnerable to shelling and sniper attacks.



Sabina (Jasna Ornela Berry) collects money for Esma at the shoe factory — a parallel community of women to the women who support each other at the survivor's center.

Whereas previously Esma seemed all eyes (imagine the initial scene at the Women's Center when Esma is the only one to look back at the camera), now her mouth becomes an orifice of agency. By telling truth, and not merely reflecting it via, for example, the fear expressed by her gaze, Esma becomes once again self-possessed. By exteriorizing her pain so intentionally, she returns to self, like her own daughter, a child of the city ("Sarajevo, my love"). Perhaps she will not re-embark on the path towards becoming a medical doctor she progressed along before the war, but she has certainly come out of hiding. Like a newborn, like in fact the revelation that Sara catalyzed in Esma upon birth, Esma embodies life force and exudes potential, not least importantly, to love and be loved.



Esma fears the permanent loss of her daughter.

*Grbavica* explicates a deep and complex bond between parent and child, mother and daughter, and shows how self-identity is co-determinant with that relationship. Esma and Sara wrestle with what they mean to one another, and this mutual arrival at a place of knowledge of the other's perspective affords the film's most significant resolution. The correlative outward and inward movement witnessed throughout *Grbavica* repeats in its closing scene. Head shorn, Sara is pictured in the rear window of the school outing bus as it pulls away from the crop of parents waving good-bye. Tears of joy spring to Esma's eyes as she recognizes in a hand raised by Sara a confirmation of their union. The gap between them closes as daughter is literally transported away from mother. No longer fearful of Sara's condemnation and revulsion, Esma can now actively identify as a torture survivor—uncloaked of the martyr's widow alter ego.

"We grew up together  
City, you and I  
The same blue sky gave us rhymes."





Sara's gesture is akin to waving the white flag of peace.



As war correspondent Chris Hedges concludes his book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, "To survive as a human being is possible only through love."



The schoolkids' physical departure from Sarajevo is, in effect, a pilgrimage back to their city.

As Sara's voice melds with the others, the sense of identification with place is heightened.

"You have your songs and I sing them  
I want to tell you my dreams  
My pleasures and your happiness  
Sarajevo, my love."

In explicating the subjectivity of exile, Edward Saïd speaks of the resentment exiles feel towards non-exiles:

"*They* belong in their surroundings, you feel, whereas an exile is always out of place. What is it like to be born in a place, to stay and live there, to know that you are of it, more or less forever?"[18]

Place as symbolic paternity ascends in *Grbavica* and serves a reconstitutive role. The truth mother and daughter reach is that they belong not in exile, but rather in "Bosnia, my wounded homeland, land of my ancestors...." When in an early scene of domestic quiet Esma reminds Sara that the poem's next line is, "[Bosnia] The land of my dreams," the child complains, "what a stupid poem." Esma's last words are,

"Write a better one, if you can...."



"The same blue sky gave us rhymes."



Sara is reunified with her surroundings.



Like the dress pattern that Esma locates in an absurdity of competing lines, truth too can be communicated.



Out of formlessness comes matter.

[Go to Notes page](#)



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

1. Emily Dickinson, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—" in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed. (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 792. First spied by author in 2007 on the New York City subway as part of "Poetry in Motion." See

<http://www.poetrysociety.org/motion/mapsite/pimpoems/newyork/nyindex.html>. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

2. Susan Sontag, "'There' and 'Here'" in *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Picador, 2002), p. 324.

3. Jasmila Zbanic, *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams* (2005, Austria/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Germany/Croatia, in Serbo-Croatian with English subtitles, 90 min). Released on DVD in the United States by Strand Releasing in 2007. In an interview provided with the film's press kit, Zbanic states, "Etymologically, the word Grbavica means woman with a hump." See Deblokada Productions <http://www.deblokada.ba/index.php?lang=en>

4. This and following quotes unless otherwise indicated are from the film, *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams*.

5. Chetnik is used in *Grbavica* to refer to the Serbian invaders.

6. Christine A. Maier, Director of Photography.

7. Susan Sontag, "Why Are We in Kosovo?" in *The New York Times Magazine* (May 2, 1999). She continues,

"I remember in Sarajevo in the summer of 1993 a Bosnian friend telling me ruefully that in 1991, when she saw on her TV set the footage of Vukovar utterly leveled by the Serbs, she thought to herself, How terrible, but that's in Croatia, that can never happen here in Bosnia ... and switched the channel. The following year, when the war started in Bosnia, she learned differently. Then she became part of a story on television that other people saw and said, How terrible ... and switched the channel."

See <http://www.nbi.dk/~predrag/projects/SontagKosovo.html>

8. Shaheed, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a Muslim martyr. "The Muslim who falls on the battlefield is called *Shahid*.. 'witness, martyr'."

9. Posters of Jennifer Lopez, Keira Knightley and others accompany the Aguilera.[\[return to page 2\]](#)
10. Indeed as revealed by the director's interview in the press kit, Zbanic identifies the songs at the Women's Center as *llahijas*, "songs dedicated to God."
11. Take the director herself as a case in point: Zbanic states in the interview,
- "Twenty-thousand women were systematically raped in Bosnia during the war. I lived 100 meters from the front line and was most afraid of this kind of aggression. Since then, rape and its consequences have become an obsession for me: I read and followed everything that was related to this topic. I still didn't know why I did this, or what I wanted to do with this. When I gave birth to my child, motherhood triggered a whole set of emotions in me — it shocked me completely. I started asking myself, what kind of emotional significance does this have for a woman who has a child who was conceived in hate. That was the moment I knew what I wanted from *Grbavica* and I wrote it — between breast feeds."
12. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 8.
13. According to her obituary in *the New York Times*, Sontag died on December 27, 2004. See [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/28/books/28cnd-sont.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/28/books/28cnd-sont.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)
14. Alain Resnais, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959, France and Japan).
15. Ibid.
16. Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, text by Marguerite Duras for the film by Alain Resnais, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961), p. 94.
17. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (The University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 881. See <http://links.jstor.org/pss/3173239>
18. Edward Saïd, "Reflections on Exile" in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 181-182.



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Joint Security Area*



Setting the mood, with many refractions.



The refractions function to situate the film as an arthouse film.



The investigation motif: an after-the-fact investigation seeks to arrive at the "truth"—which of course can never be known.

## Culture wars: some new trends in art horror

by [Joan Hawkins](#)

"When the Korean director Park Chan-Wook walked away with the second-most prestigious prize at the Cannes Film Festival last year, it did more than raise a few eyebrows and critical hackles. It signaled that this wasn't your father's hoity-toity snooze-fest; this was the new, improved Cannes, baby — fast and furious and genre-friendly. Mr. Park's award-winning "Oldboy," a blood-spattered revenge movie that features death by hammer and other such tasty sport, might have been an exploitation flick, but it was an *arty* exploitation flick." — *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis on a special screening of Park's work at the BAMcinématek

## Culture wars

In March 2005, BAMcinématek in New York mounted a retrospective honoring Korean director Park Chan-Wook. Park is perhaps best known in the United States for *Joint Security Area* (2000), a conventional but surprisingly moving thriller about the politically charged friendships that develop among North and South Korean border guards. Emblematic of a certain kind of U.S. arthouse fare, *Joint Security Area* stresses psychology and human emotion over brutal action. The violence — when it does come in the film's inevitable climax — is played less for gore than for heartbreak; the fatal result of a tragic geopolitical standoff.

If Park's subsequent films had followed the same generic pattern as *Joint Security Area*, the BAM retrospective would have opened, as so many do, with little fanfare. There would have been a respectful notice in the *New York Times* and some individual film reviews. Perhaps a lament that Korean cinema is not better known in the United States — not as well-distributed as Hong Kong action flicks or Japanese yakuza movies. But Park's subsequent films have not followed the same generic pattern. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002) is a violent thriller about organ-theft and kidnapping; *Oldboy* (2003) is a chilling horror-revenge movie that ends with a man cutting off his own tongue. Although *Oldboy* won a Grand Prix Second Prize at Cannes and solidified Park's reputation as an international auteur, the graphic elements and general creepiness in this film, as well as in the rest of Park's recent work, has also made him a favorite among cult and horror aficionados. And it is this — his dual status as international arthouse auteur and as cult/horror auteur — which troubled the opening of his BAMcinématek retrospective.

Writing for the *New York Times*, film critic Dargis used the Park retrospective as an occasion to write a scathing review not only of Park's art-horror films, but also of recent trends in U.S. international arthouse fare.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Dargis writes in a passage worth quoting at length,



In the film's tragic climax...



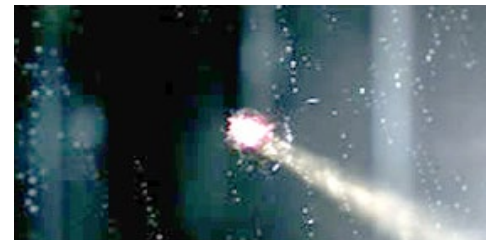
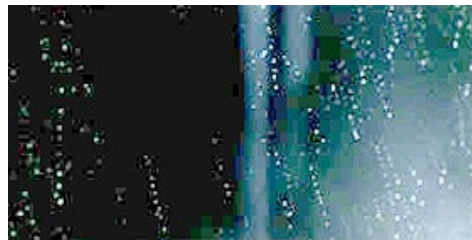
... both the pacing and the imagery ...



... are reminiscent of Bertolucci's *The Conformist*.

“The ascendancy of Mr. Park in the last few years, is partly a testament to his talent. He knows where to put the camera, how to build tension inside the frame and through editing, and he has an eye for how striking fake blood can look pooling over the ground or blooming underwater. *But the filmmaker’s success in the international arena, his integration into the upper tier of the festival circuit and his embrace by some cinephiles also reflect a dubious development in recent cinema: the mainstreaming of exploitation...* Movies that were once relegated to midnight screenings at festivals — and, in an earlier age, grindhouses like those that once enlivened Times Square — are now part of the main event.”[2]

In many ways, Dargis’ lament is simply a new variation on an old theme. Historically, art horror has troubled critics. It challenges generic assumptions (which are always already under siege both by the rise of generic hybrids, and also, as Thomas Schatz convincingly argues, by the inevitable evolution of genres themselves).[3] But more importantly, art horror challenges continuing cherished assumptions about culture and taste. What’s troubling to Dargis about Park’s work is not the violence or the exploitation elements *per se*. In fact, Dargis often gives favorable and perceptive reviews of “pure” horror films (those which are not received at Cannes). For example, she called George Romero’s *Land of the Dead* “an excellent freakout of a movie” and wrote one of the best pieces on the film that I have read.[4] Rather, what is at stake for Dargis in Park’s Cannes reception, is the erosion of a certain *idea* about art cinema. This idea elevates art cinema as something culturally superior to and clearly distinct from exploitation. It is *Oldboy*’s “integration into the upper tier of the festival circuit” that bothers her, and the erosion of art/trash distinctions that such an integration implies.







Time seems slowed down, even as action itself and the shots seem precipitous.



As I have argued elsewhere, the lines between arthouse (high culture) cinema and trash (exploitation, horror, soft porn etc) have never been as clear-cut in the United States as taste critics would like to maintain.[5] The midnight screenings and “grindhouses... that once enlivened Times Square” — mentioned in Dargis’s review — were historically the site where high art and trash cinema commingled in the United States. During the period of the Hays Code, all films that did not receive the Breen Office seal of approval were shown outside mainstream theatrical release. In practical terms, this meant that Times Square theaters showing a film by Godard one week frequently showed a biker or J.D. (juvenile delinquent exploitation) flick the following week. Often they showed these films to the same audiences. Further, European art cinema was frequently advertised in ways that called attention to its “scandalous” and exploitation elements: It was sexier than U.S. cinema and the ads for the films generally featured provocatively posed, lingerie-clad women. A number of U.S. and European films — especially but not solely art-horror movies — routinely migrated between taste categories depending on the titles and distribution they received.[6] And given art cinema’s willingness to transgress the boundaries of good taste (e.g., Buñuel’s films, to cite just one example), the lines dividing high art cinema from low horror have not always been that easy to see.





The final shoot out in *Joint Security Area* is a beautiful scene to watch, not at all like the gore in Park's subsequent films. For the critic Dargis, the later departure from the style shown in this film marks a kind of arthouse crisis.

Images from *Oldboy*



*Oldboy's* tongue-cutting scene: As with many graphic horror films, the buildup is almost worse than the actual violence. And there is a certain terror in the mere fact that Oh Dae-Su hits on this expedient action as a solution to his problem. The film develops psychological horror— a different type than the "bus strategy" used by classic directors such as Val Lewton.



Oh Dae-Sue in his most depressed state. The mise-en-scene has the

The blurring of the boundaries between art cinema and body genres, what Dargis calls "the mainstreaming of exploitation," is not really then "a development in recent cinema." It is part and parcel of the history of art cinema in the United States (and even to a degree in Great Britain).[7] More recently, that blurring has continued in the "guilty pleasures" programs offered at art theaters and in the inventories maintained by the catalogue companies and websites catering to paracinema and art cinema fans.[8] DVD companies have capitalized on the longstanding high/low dialectic with new releases of cult favorites. Criterion, for example, which continues to publicize its dedication "to gathering the greatest films from around the world" has recently added to its lineup the paracinema classics *Fiend without a Face* (Arthur Crabtree, 1958), *The Blob* (Irwin S. Yearnworth, 1958), and *Carnival of Souls* (Herk Harvey, 1962).[9] Facets Multimedia of Chicago — a rental and sales outlet specializing in arthouse, experimental and avant-garde cinema — has long maintained an extensive "guilty pleasures" and trash cinema list, which includes cult classics by Russ Meyer, Roger Corman, John Waters and Ed Wood Jr. as well as Elvis Presley flicks, blaxploitation, grade B sci-fi, and trailers and commercials.

In fact, if there is a contemporary trend toward the "mainstreaming of exploitation," it is not happening at the high end of the culture spectrum (arthouses and film festivals), where taste-cultures have always been eclectic. Rather it is happening at the level of DVD sales and stock, and in shopping mall bookstore/DVD chain outlets, such as Borders Books and Music. Films that used to be available in the United States only on low-resolution video tape transfers from European laser discs are now frequently available as high quality DVDs, complete with all the extras DVDs traditionally offer.[10] Anchor Bay has released an extensive list of titles by European horror favorites Dario Argento, Jess Franco, and Lucio Fulci. BlueUnderground has released Rolf De Heer's cult favorite *Bad Boy Bubby* (1993) as well as a series of drive-in classics. And because the films have been released on commercial DVDs, collectors no longer need to go to specialty companies to find them.

This commercial mainstreaming of exploitation and euroshocker titles has not, however, completely mitigated the need for specialty houses. Sadly, there are still many films —such as the arthouse horrors *Alucarda* (Juan López Moctezuma, 1978) and *Death Walks at Midnight* (Luciano Ercoli, 1973) — which have not been commercially released for the U.S. home market. Nicheflix, a relatively new DVD rental company, caters to people who own multistandard

same palette and pulled focus that we'll see later in *The Machinist* and *Bad Boy Bubby*, where the color scheme explicitly signifies existential angst.



Teeth extraction scene.



Oh Dae-Su uses this mode of persuasion to get one of his tormentors to reveal information. As in Quentin Tarantino's famous ear-cutting scene in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), the violence actually takes place off-screen. Viewers still have the impression, however, that they've seen the actual removal of teeth.



This animation scene has a comic book feel to it, and students often laugh at it when I show the film in class.



DVD players precisely because they cannot find everything they want in an U.S. format.[11] Luminous Film and Video Wurks, one of the best and longest running collector companies, has added international region formats to its inventory and its website has links for the “best code free/region free DVD player,” the Malata DVP-558 ([www.lfvw.com/news.html](http://www.lfvw.com/news.html)). Facets Multimedia similarly offers a limited number of imported DVDs to its customers. These include previously unreleased (in the U.S.), subtitled films by Henri-Georges Clouzot (*La Prisonnière*, 1968) as well as some cult favorites. And the web is full of collector sites that cater to fans of Asian horror cinema ([eday.com](http://eday.com), for example).

In addition, there is still a thriving alternative market, where consumers can find many of the art and exploitation films that have not yet been commercially released for home viewing. DVDs burned from the kinds of video products described in my book *Cutting Edge* ossify and fix (literally “burn in”) analog trash aesthetic elements (the “cool” effects of many collector videos: grainy pictures, washed-out and wandering colors, de-magnetized sound).[12] But the digital process also adds what one of my students has called “new paracinema effects” peculiar to the medium: pixellation, flashing, and other markers of digital reproduction (these are there, of course, whether the DVD was burned from a video transfer or from another source). That is, just as collector videos announce their status as “rare” objects through markers of home recording, so too rare collector DVDs bear all the signs of being burned on a home system. Discs often come in little white DVD-R sleeves, with the names of the films handwritten in magic marker on the DVD itself.[13] Catalogues are less prevalent now, increasingly replaced with websites and listserv postings. But the catalogue aesthetic has remained dominant, as collector websites maintain the no-frills functional format of the now outmoded print publications. There is frequently (although not always) a digital image from the film and a brief description of the movie. Sites selling commercial DVDs include a list of specs (aspect ratio, languages, etc.) and of any extras (interviews, author commentary, etc.) included in the package. Sometimes there are reviews and customer comments, but these are rare. Collector commentary is generally reserved for listserv communiqués, blogs, chat rooms, and individual websites.

I have written at length about collecting and home viewing because for those of



An ant sits in the back of the subway car, another surreal and comic book touch, which marks a shift in register in an otherwise essentially humanist film.

us who cannot afford to go to the prestigious film festivals and who do not live in urban centers, art horror has simply not become mainstream enough. Most of the titles cited in this article received limited theatrical release in the United States. I saw all of them for the first time on a home DVD player. Many of them I have never been able to see projected (either on celluloid or digitally) in a commercial theater. Home viewing is not only increasingly the preferred mode of viewing for many U.S. spectators. In many instances it remains the only way the films that Dargis describes in her review can be seen.[14]



Tattoo sequence: The marking of flesh also gives *Oldboy* a very tactile quality. It draws the viewer's attention to minute detail that otherwise might go unnoticed. It not only reveals the protagonist's psychology but teaches us how to read his world through his eyes.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Freaky treasures

#### Images from Saw



The visuals alternate between color sequences providing a kind of "objective" view of men in their prison and...



... a kind of lunatic god's eye view that's represented by grainy black and white video.

As one friend remarked, to work on Asian and European cinema while living in the United States is — in the present commercial climate — akin to doing anthropology before ethnography changed the discipline (the time when strange and curious artifacts were exhibited and studied, completely outside of their cultural and social context). Changes in mainstream commercial distribution patterns in the United States mean that there is no longer any coherent attempt to bring foreign films to U.S. audiences, certainly not the kind of coherent attempt that companies like New Yorker once made. Instead of buying and distributing groups of films — all of Miike Takashi or all new Japanese cinema, for example — companies pick individual titles that appear to have a marketing hook.<sup>[15]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Outré sex and violence is one obvious such hook, but there are others. For example, more Afghan and Iranian films were released in the United States in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy. And earlier, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was — temporarily — increased access to Eastern European films.

But even when several Japanese or German films are bought and distributed, they are shown as interesting, *individual* artifacts, from which the viewer is expected to infer an entire culture and an entire industrial relation (that is, the individual film's connection both to world cinema and to its own national cinema). The films are shown out of context. Those of us who live outside the festival/cinémathèque beltway frequently do not see the other films — national dramas and genre films, for example — to which these U.S. theatrical releases might be responding. And frequently we know little of the cultural or political tensions within the societies that produce them. As a result, the main selling point about foreign films tends to become their very exoticism. They seem to be in conversation with some other film tradition, with some other culture, which we do not entirely understand. They become, in Chris Anderson's words, "freaky treasures."<sup>[16]</sup>

The epistemological problems posed by the current U.S. system are a little less severe for those attempting to study international generic developments in art horror. Although the inclusion of titles (particularly those by unknown directors) in a list can seem haphazard, collector companies and specialty houses do make a coherent attempt to represent national cinemas (within a limited generic scope), generic trends (subgenres) and auteurs. Italian horror and *gialli*, for example, are well-represented in catalogues and on websites. Thus it has been possible to get a sense of the different trends and tensions in their generic development from the 1970s to the 90s. Certainly, it has been easier to get a complete sense of the evolution of Dario Argento's career during this period (since the collector sites also sell tapes of his



In *Saw*, God is a lunatic who feels...



... compelled to mete out some kind of justice.

Images from *The Machinist*



To create this existential horror film, director Brad Anderson made a link between an industrial environment and the character's existential crisis. He used a muted industrial palette for much of the film, which he shot in Spain to find a kind of hands-on machine shop, not the high tech ones like those found in the U.S.

television productions and interviews), than it is to get a good sense of the evolution of Godard's work with Anne-Marie Miéville. Claude Chabrol's *Le Cri du hibou* (1987) and other French thrillers of the 1980s were available for purchase from Luminous prior to their mainstream U.S. commercial distribution; so those of us working in art horror could look at the move toward horror themes in Chabrol's career as well as get some sense of the horrific developments in 1980s French *polars* and thriller films (*La Balance* 1982, *One Deadly Summer* 1983). The fact that the same companies also sold splatter French gorefest movies (Jean Rollin's films, for example) helped to provide some of the cinematic context against which to read the increased violence in thriller/art-horror flicks. Just how transgressive (in the French context) was the violent climax of Chabrol's 1995 *La Cérémonie* and how did it compare with the gory narration ending Nancy Meckler's *Sister My Sister* (1994), a British film based on a similar story? These questions can be approached now, through judicious purchases from the collector catalogue companies.

That is not to say, however, that all the epistemological problems outlined above can be neatly avoided if one sticks with the art-horror genre and turns to alternative DVD sources. Part of the problem U.S. critics have had in reading the recent art horror French formation which James Quandt calls "the new French extremity" (the films of Catherine Breillat, François Ozon, Gaspar Noé, etc.)[17], for example, rests with distribution problems. While the new French films have been distributed here and are readily available on DVD, the *Beur* and *banlieue* films against which (at least in part) they must be read are rarely seen outside the festival circuit.[18] If you do not speak French or Arabic, and you do not have access to a North African or Moroccan store, you will be able to locate only a handful of select *banlieue* titles in the United States. Even within the festival circuit, they can be maddeningly difficult to find; one title one year, one title the next and then one or two years of no titles at all. So it is nearly impossible for U.S. viewers to gain a good sense of the kind of impact they have had on western audiences and young French filmmakers. And, of course, if we do not visit France or Europe all that often, or have regular access to the local media, we can easily forget just how tense the race-class situation is right now in Paris.

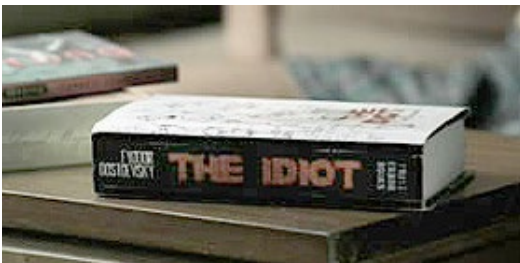
The current system of distribution should make intelligent critics like Dargis wary of making sweeping qualitative judgments about arthouse cinema and the devolution of taste. At least it should dictate that reviewers frame their comments with the caveat that market forces have helped to delimit and impoverish the range of cinemas which U.S. audiences are readily able to see. Some critics — most notably Jonathan Rosenbaum of the *Chicago Reader* — do routinely remind readers that



The street signs that mark the locale as specifically "American" all had to be added. In that sense, the image of the U.S. that emerges here bears the same relation to reality as Trevor's screen memories do.



Christian Bale lost 62 pounds to play the lead role. At the time of the filming he weighed 120 pounds. His gaunt look gives him something of the air of a Goya figure. It also fits the motif of...



... of the book he's reading, *The Idiot*. Many of his delusions seem to derive from Dostoyevsky's plot and the book's motif runs throughout the film.

Images from *Bad Boy Bubby*

many of the best Asian and European films do not receive theatrical distribution at all.[19] Or they receive such limited distribution that only critics (those who watch films for a living) or collectors (those who track films as a kind of obsessional avocation) are able to see them.

## The new extremity

The Dargis review of Park's work (with which I began this essay) is interesting in the way it links some disparate trends in art horror under one rubric: the new extreme cinema. In part, this naming is itself a function of distribution. As Dargis notes, Park's works are distributed by the British-based Tartan Films,

"which puts out works of undisputed artistic worth, genre classics, and pure schlock under the rubric Asia Extreme." [20]

Asia Extreme also distributes Breillat's *Anatomy of Hell* (2004), a fact which enables Dargis to link new French "extreme" cinema and Asian horror in interesting ways. So Takeshi Miike's *Audition* (1999) is mentioned here alongside Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (Irreversible, 2002) and South Korean director Kim Ki-Duk's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and Spring* (2003). Along with Park, these directors, Dargis writes,

"have earned critical and institutional recognition, partly because of their ability to invent ever more visually arresting ways to turn violence into entertainment." [21]

Certainly, there are similarities that suggest comparison. But while I think Dargis is right that there is a certain extreme quality to the violence in contemporary French and Asian films, I do not think it is helpful to homogenize the traditions — as though all "visually arresting ways to turn violence into entertainment" ultimately mean the same thing, or even have the same visceral effect. Certainly, *Oldboy* invokes a despairing masochism that I am not sure is present in the new French films. In even as masochistic a work as *Dans ma peau* (In My Skin, 2002), Marina De Van's film about cutting, mutilation is accompanied by a kind of erotic euphoria rather than the almost unbearable guilt which accompanies it in *Oldboy*. And the reversal of shock effects in *Irréversible* and in François Ozon's recent *5x2* (2004), both of which begin with rape scenes, yields a totally different affect (and reading strategy) than the shift to violent-horror (in the second half of the film) which *Audition* visits upon its audience.

Interestingly Park's success with *Oldboy* at Cannes provides the jumping-off point for what ultimately amounts to an invective (by Dargis) against the new extreme cinema — both French and Asian. For, in many ways, *Oldboy* is an extremely old-fashioned film. And it also intersects with other trends in art-horror — trends which I suspect Dargis would find less objectionable than the "new extremity" and which sadly go unmentioned in her critique.

*Oldboy* begins with a kidnapping. Oh Dae-su [Min-Sik Choi], an unruly





In an excruciating opening sequence, a middle aged woman treats her adult child as if her were an infant.



She washes and shaves him, and she feeds him a toddler-mix of white bread chunks, sugar, and warm milk, before making him sit on a chair while she goes out. Much later she punishes him for soiling the chair, and still later she tells him to fuck her. The images of abuse throughout are extremely difficult to watch.



Mom always wears a gas mask to go out to do her errands and has told Bubby that the poisonous gas outside would poison him if he ever tried to leave. Given the initial palette and grunge aesthetic of the film, we initially accept this as some kind of post-apocalypse horror show. It's only much later, when a kitten manages to get into the room Bubby shares with Mom,

drunk, is abducted one rainy night and imprisoned in a room for no apparent reason. Drugged and hypnotized, he spends the next fifteen years in a state of near madness, wondering who is keeping him prisoner and why. Suddenly released (the rationale for his release is as unknown to him as the reason for his capture), he sets out to find his abductor and exact revenge. But his captor has an agenda of his own. He gives Oh Dae-su an assignment. The former captive has five days to find out who instigated his abduction and why, or Mido [Hye-jeong Kang], the young woman who has been helping him and whom he has grown to love, will be killed.

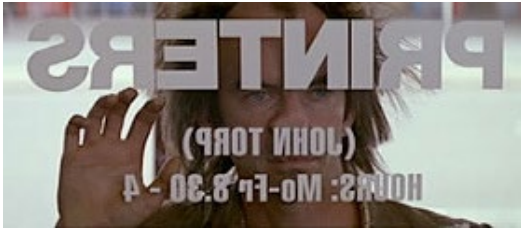
There is a great deal of violence in the film, but surprisingly little gore. As in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1991), the most gruesome scenes actually take place off-screen. The visual suggestion that someone is using a claw hammer to forcibly extract teeth — and revenge — is enough alone to make many viewers look away (it is perhaps no surprise that Tarantino was on the Cannes jury which awarded Park the prize). Much of the violence that does take place on screen has a comic book quality that mitigates the effect. For example, an animated line appears on screen and seems to link Oh Dae-Su to a potential informant at the opening of one menacing moment. And there is a black-humor sequence about suicide that seems almost Monty Pythonesque in its abruptness. In addition, there are continual shifts in register (at one point Mido imagines herself on a subway train with an enormous ant) that work to occasionally blunt, or at least distract us from, the film's humanistic message — that revenge is pointless.

I believe this last aspect of *Oldboy* — its lack of a *consistent* humanistic tone — brings it closest to the films that James Quandt has dubbed “the New French Extremity”[22] and makes it part of the new “extreme” arthouse cinema that so troubles Dargis. As with the affective films of Breillat and No  , it is difficult to know where on the ideological spectrum to place *Oldboy*, difficult to find anything like the film's “moral center.”[23] In that sense, the film itself becomes something of an extension of the jumbled television images that Oh Dae-su sees during his fifteen years of captivity. The serious and the trivial, the deadly and the banal are juxtaposed into one vast sociopolitical cultural jumble.

But the film also taps into another cycle of art-horror movies, the new spate of which, for want of a better term, I will term guilt-trauma films. These include *Bad Boy Bubby*, James Wan's *Saw* (2004), and Brad Anderson's *The Machinist* (2004), films in which male protagonists find themselves imprisoned without fully understanding why. Like the protagonists of *Saw* and *The Machinist*, Dae-su only knows that he is guilty and must discover or (as in the case of Trevor Reznik/Christian Bale in *The Machinist*) remember what he has done. The film's incarceration sequence is, in many ways, *Oldboy's* strongest and most unbearable moment. Here we watch Dae-Su struggle to make sense of his situation, escape (by digging a hole in the wall) and keep sane. As with all such incarceration films, it becomes abundantly clear here what a tenuous hold on sanity even the most grounded of us really have. Although he has a pencil and is able to keep a sort of prison diary, Dae-su chooses to keep track of time by tattooing lines on his skin (one for



that we realize that we like Bubby have been duped.



Bubby escapes and begins to explore the world. He has a slightly mad demeanor and can only mimic what other people do.



His mimicry is put to good use in the music world. He hooks up with a punk rock band and makes a name for himself by simply channeling and repeating all the horrible things his mother used to say to him.



*Oldboy*: Split-screen sequences situate us in time, that of 9/11, but they also...

each year of imprisonment). In part, this chronicle-on-the-flesh works to ensure that he will not be unmarked by what has happened to him, that — like victims of Nazi concentration camps — he will carry a permanent sign of freedom's arbitrary nature.

Each of these films has a strong tone of existential alienation and angst. In that sense they have a great deal in common with modernist arthouse films of a bygone era. *Saw* unfolds like a horror version of Sartre's *No Exit*, as two men awaken to find themselves chained on opposite sides of a room — with what appears to be a dead body between them. *The Machinist* pays homage to Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. And *Bad Boy Bubby* is a sad and terrifying meditation on Sartre's famous dictum that existence precedes essence. Abused and kept locked in a room for thirty-five years, Bubby has become a product of his environment. When he finally escapes, he has no point of reference against which to judge the world and can only mimic what others say and do to him. Like *Bubby*, *Oldboy* builds audience sympathy for its main character during the incarceration sequence. Voice-over narration gives us access to his thoughts, and the use of split screen (media images from the TV playing on the right, while Dae-su waits on the left) constantly reminds us of his sudden removal from history (and, incidentally, how much time is passing).

In terms of distribution, the guilt-trauma films have fared somewhat better than the European and Asian films discussed earlier in this article. And since two of them — *The Machinist* and *Saw* — are U.S. films, it is easier to see them within their cultural context.[24] Both films received wide theatrical distribution and the DVDs have been picked up by Blockbuster and other major outlets. *Oldboy* is becoming easier to track since Netflix and Nicheflix have purchased it, but for a long time it was available in the United States only as a promise (there were websites, but it was not clear when the DVD would actually become available).

The Australian-made *Bad Boy Bubby* has suffered the most in this regard. Arguably the best film in the cycle, it has received little play in the United States despite winning the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival. This is depressing, given the film's artistic and experimental qualities. Using a method similar to the one employed by John Cassavetes, director De Heer shot the film in sequence. In order to build sympathy for the main character, he experimented with aural-perspective, creating a soundscape unlike anything I have heard before in cinema. Finally, he used thirty-two cinematographers to shoot discrete scenes in the film. None of the cinematographers saw previous footage, so the film unfolds as a remarkable series of vignettes or shorts, which are held together (and given continuity) primarily by the sound. From a purely formal point of view, therefore, the film needs to be seen, studied, and discussed. The fact that it also tells a moving and intelligent story simply underscores its importance.

## Conclusion

What I have aimed to do in this essay is to open up some of the antithetical impulses in art horror for discussion, and also to revisit and update the taste culture arguments that characterize my book *Cutting*



... indicate the kind of mental split experienced by the protagonist.

*Edge*. I have chosen Dargis' review as a point of departure, not out of any desire to paint her as obtuse. Rather, precisely because she is a perceptive critic (particularly in the area of horror cinema), her review of Park seems emblematic of a larger set of cultural blind spots. That there is a continued replay of the age-old taste debate is depressing for scholars who work in this area. But it is also a reminder how almost willfully ignorant of our own cultural history we are. And the ongoing tendency to speak as though everyone in a country like the United States has equal access to festival culture becomes here a necessary reminder of just how class-inflected the debates over taste remain.[25]

[Go to notes page](#)



[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

In *Bad Boy Bubby* director De Heer placed microphones next to actor Nicholas Hope's ears, so that every time he moves his head, the sound perspective changes. For that reason the DVD carries a sound advisory: "Since the sound is from Bubby's perspective, the audio imaging is often flipped from the action on the screen."

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

Special thanks to Chris Anderson, Mark Benedetti, Burcu Bakioglu, Nathan Carroll, Robert Clift, Ian Conrich, Skip Hawkins, and Greg Waller for their help and encouragement; and to the collectors, specialty houses and *Video Watchdog* who all make it possible for me to do my work.

[1] By this term I mean the international films distributed in the U.S. which still play by and large in the festival and arthouse circuit, outside “mainstream” cinemas.[\[return to page 1 of essay\]](#)

[2] Manohla Dargis, “Sometimes Blood Really Isn’t Indelible.” *New York Times*, March 3, 2005, p. B7. Italics mine.

[3] See Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.

[4] Manohla Dargis, Not Just Roaming, Zombies Rise Up.” *New York Times*, June 24, 2005, p. B1

[5] Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

[6] Tod Browning’s 1932 film *Freaks* is the classic case in point here. Released initially as a mainstream film, then shown on the exploitation and drive-in circuit, and finally resuscitated as an arthouse film. Georges Franju’s *Les Yeux sans visage* (*The Horror Chamber of Dr. Faustus*, *Eyes Without a Face*, 1959) and Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1959) offer further examples. For more on this, see Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

[7] Even the “the integration” of body genre films “into the upper tier of the festival circuit” has historical precedent. *Taxi Driver*, which was considered a hyper-violent film whose cultural “value” was debated at the time of its release, won the Palme d’Or at Cannes in 1976. To be fair to Dargis, though, the Festival traditionally prefers less violent films. Joseph Losey’s *Go-Between* won the Palme in 1971, the same year that saw the release of Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* and Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*.

[8] Paracinema is an elastic category which includes low horror, grade B sci-fi films from the fifties, hard-to-find European titles, sword and sandal flicks, Asian horror, juvenile delinquent films, exploitation and softcore porn, avant-garde cinema, and historical social guidance films (to name just a few genres). As Jeffrey Sconce has argued, fans with this special cinematic taste, are

commonly linked by reading strategies and a certain cultural capital. For more, see Jeffrey Sconce's, "Trashing the Academy': Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style" in this volume and Hawkins' *Cutting Edge*.

[9] Other recent additions advertised on the website include Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Joan of Arc* (1928), and Anthony Asquith's *The Browning Version* (1951). See [www.criterionco.com](http://www.criterionco.com). For more on Criterion's DVDs see James Kendrick, "Aspect Ratios and Joe Six-Packs: Home Theater Enthusiasts' Battle to Legitimize the DVD Experience," *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 56, Fall 2005.

[10] Hawkins, op. cit., pp. 8, 87-116.

[11] See <[www.nicheflix.com](http://www.nicheflix.com)>

[12] See *Cutting Edge*, 33-52.

[13] Nathan Carroll, *Public Access and Private Archives*. Unpublished dissertation, in progress. Indiana University, Bloomington. For more on DVDs see the Fall 2005 special DVD edition of the *Velvet Light Trap*. Forthcoming.

[14] According to an Associated Press release, 75% of Americans polled for an American Online survey said they preferred to watch films at home.

<http://www.cnn.com/2005/showbiz/Movies/06/17/movies.poll.ap>

Dated June 18, 2005. (Accessed July 6, 2005). For a detailed study of home viewing see Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies and The Home*, Berkeley et al: University of California Press, 2006.

[15] Currently, even the attempt to sustain the brand-name of an auteur seems to have been abandoned. Companies will buy the rights to an auteur's film and then just keep it in the vault, often for years. Occasionally the film will finally turn up as an extra on a DVD many years later. For more on current distribution problems in the U.S. see Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See*, Chicago: A Capella Press, 2000.[\[return to page 2 of essay\]](#)

[16] I am indebted to Chris Anderson for these observations and the quote.

[17] See, for example, Catherine Breillat's *Anatomie de l'enfer* (*Anatomy of Hell*, 2004); François Ozon's *5X2* (2004) and *Regarde la mer* (*See the Sea*, 1997); and Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (*Irreversible* 2002) and *Seul contre tous* (*I Stand Alone*, 1998).

[18] James Quandt, "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema" *Artforum*, February 2004, pp. 126-132. *Beur* is the term applied to second generation children of North African immigrants, who are born in France. *Banlieue* is the term for suburbs, and refers to the areas surrounding Paris where many people of North African descent live. They are not the only



inhabitants, however, and the term “banlieue film” refers to films set in these troubled areas, which may be made by white filmmakers or members of other (non North African) ethnic groups. Roughly speaking, these films are the equivalent of ‘hood films made in the United States.

[19] See Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See*, Chicago: A Capella Press, 2000.

[20] Dargis, “Sometimes Blood Really Isn’t Indelible,” p. B7

[21] Ibid.

[22] Quandt, op.cit. p. 127

[23] The French films which James Quandt links under the rubric, “the New French Extremity” are themselves a disparate group and a difficult cultural read. Quandt cannot decide whether they have more in common with the “épater les bourgeois” spirit of the French Surrealists or with the work of the right-wing anarchist hussards of the 1950s. That is, he cannot determine whether the films of these new cinematic provocateurs align politically with the Left or with the Right, whether they are culturally progressive or reactionary. In a sense, like many of the horror films Robin Wood discusses, they are both and it is perhaps this imbrication — or perhaps dialectic — of liberal and conservative tendencies which makes the films so deeply troubling.

[24] Stephen Holden’s review of *Saw* in *The New York Times* discussed the film in terms of the Iraq war, for example. Stephen Holden, “A Gore Fest, With Overtones of Iraq and TV.” *New York Times*, October 29, 2004. Archived at

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/29saw.html>

[25] See Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Season 1 logo of *Masters of Horror*.  
"Thirteen famous horror movie directors direct a one hour short horror film for the Showtime television network."



Exploitation or exposition? - sexualized violence in *Imprint*.

## Misogyny as radical commentary — *Rashomon* retold in Takashi Miike's *Masters of Horror: Imprint*

by [William Leung](#)

"Me, a 'Master of Horror'? I'm the guy that made *Salaryman Kintaro!*" — Takashi Miike, "Japan Premiere of *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A*" (Brown, "Report" par. 6)

"Generally if the audience feel that it's like that [i.e. misogynistic], then they are right." — Takashi Miike, "An Interview with Takashi Miike" (Mes, *Agitator* 363)

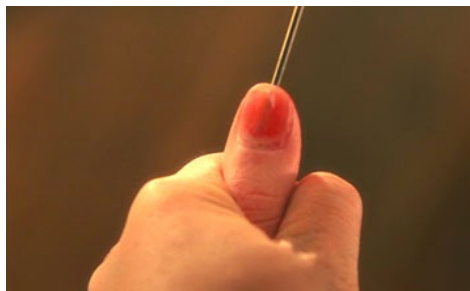
Claims that Japanese "cult" filmmaker Takashi Miike is "misogynistic" are hardly new. Miike's detractors inevitably rely on his most controversial films — films such as *Audition* (1999), *Ichi the Killer* (2001), and *Visitor Q* (2001) — to justify their claims.[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Miike's defenders, though they might acknowledge the evidence to support such claims, could perhaps remind the detractors that it is still open to debate whether Miike's "misogyny" is brilliantly exploitative or brilliantly expositive. With *Imprint* (2005), however, the detractors may have found something at last to silence the defenders. Even Miike's regular fans seem to have trouble making sense of — let alone defending — this one![2]



A half-naked, gagged and bound Japanese woman ...



... being singed with burning incense at her armpits ...



... and having knitting needles



... and gums.

inserted into her fingernails ...

*Imprint* is an hour-long episode commissioned by U.S. filmmaker Mick Garris for the debut season of his pet project *Masters of Horror*. Created by Garris, *Masters of Horror* is a cable television series featuring original short films by some of the world's leading horror filmmakers: "a ground-breaking, award-winning series that redefined terror" is the official blurb that accompanies the recent release of the series' debut season as a DVD box-set (Anchor Bay 2007, par. 1). In the first season, thirteen films by thirteen "masters" were originally scheduled for broadcast between 28 October 2005 and 27 January 2006 on the U.S. cable network "Showtime." However, only twelve episodes made it to air in North America. The reason is that the last episode (Miike's) was withdrawn at the eleventh hour by Showtime on account of the episode's extreme content.[3]

On paper, *Imprint* looks innocent enough. Some time in the late nineteenth century, an U.S. journalist travels to Japan in search of a Japanese woman he has loved and lost. His quest takes him to a seedy brothel located on a remote island, where he encounters a disfigured prostitute, who claims to know the woman he is seeking. On being told that his lover is dead, the U.S. traveler demands to know how she died. The disfigured prostitute then tells the American several versions of the "truth" about the events leading to his lover's death. But there is a sting in the tale: a lavishly staged, five-minute, all-female torture sequence in which a half-naked, gagged and bound Japanese actress is shown being singed with burning incense at her armpits and having knitting needles inserted into her fingernails and gums. Various spectacles of grotesquerie and exoticism dominate other parts of the film. Grim realities of rural poverty are overlaid by a colorful parade of outlandish costumes. Moments of reflective beauty are set against graphic images of domestic violence, pedophilia, abortion, murder, putrid corpses and bloody fetuses. Not inaccurately, one critic has summed up the whole effect as an "infernal variation on *Memoirs of a Geisha*" (Kehr par. 8).

Although anyone who has seen *Memoirs of a Geisha* may want to argue that *Memoirs* is "infernal" enough on its own, at least *Memoirs* did not deliberately set out to be so. In contrast, *Imprint* is almost calculated to be offensive and controversial. To be sure, if being offensive and controversial is what it takes to be a master of horror, then Miike should probably be dubbed grandmaster of horror. Not even the horror academe's distinguished fellows such as Tobe Hopper, John Carpenter and Dario Argento could claim to have done their homework so well that they had to be pulled into line by their network headmasters. Controversy, though, seldom enhances one's credibility, and it is Miike's credibility as a filmmaker which seems to have suffered from this project. While few critics have denied that *Imprint* is shocking, almost no one



According to Donald Richie, *Rashomon* is "the most honored of all Japanese films."



has been prepared to take *Imprint* seriously. The verdict has almost been unanimous that the film is a poor joke not particularly well told, representing, at best, a lurid overkill by an unpredictable provocateur who is performing way below his best.[4]

In this essay, I aim to play the angel's advocate and present a case for a serious consideration of Miike's film. Methodologically, I have decided against revisiting many of the topics which have become de rigeur in Miike criticism: for example, his status as a "cult" filmmaker; his "brilliance" as a stylist; his obsession with "meaningless" violence; his contribution to "radical" Asian cinema, particularly to "extreme" Asian cinema.[5] Instead, I shall focus on pursuing a close reading of *Imprint* based on my understanding of the film's creative rationale, literary background and reception context. I regard *Imprint* as a serious polemical film (not just a cheap thrill dressed up as a class act) and argue that it has two main polemical objectives. First, *Imprint* could be interpreted as a horror satire exposing the unspoken phallocentric politics underlying Japanese cinema's most revered masterpiece, *Rashomon* (1950), directed by Japanese cinema's most revered master director, Akira Kurosawa. Second, *Imprint* could be interpreted as a radical critique of white America's part-fawning, part-patronizing appropriation of Kurosawa and Japanese culture.



"In Europe and America, my work is limited on the abnormal side of the pendulum – extremely." Extremely abnormal activities from Miike's *Audition*, ...



... Visitor Q, ...



... Full Metal Yakuza ...



... and Ichi the Killer.

Even though the similarities between *Imprint* and *Rashomon* have been noticed by more than a few critics, the comparison is almost never pursued beyond the casual remark that *Imprint*'s narrative is "*Rashomon*-like." [6] Indeed, to many Kurosawa-fans, the comparison may even come across as arbitrary and sacrilegious: a bit like comparing a kitschy papier-mâché with a monolithic monument. However, I defend making the comparison on several grounds. First, *Rashomon* is such a fundamental visual text not only in Japan but also in the United States that its relevance to a Japanese-American project like *Imprint* is too important to ignore. Scott Nygren has called the film

"a hinge not just between Japanese isolation and world recognition, but between dominant Western assumptions and the possibility of a genuine world cinema" (100)

Second, I have traced a series of visual and thematic similarities between the two films, similarities which inform my argument and which I hope to demonstrate are purposive rather than incidental or accidental. Third, I will use the comparison to challenge a common criticism directed against Miike: namely, that he is an all flash, no substance trickster-filmmaker who has to employ shock tactics to disguise his inability to hold a coherent argument. Instead, I will try to make a case for a long overdue recognition of Miike's capacity as a serious polemical filmmaker — no easy task considering how extensively *Imprint* has been deprecated and ridiculed by critics and fans alike.

Moreover, I have found it necessary to examine not just the reception of *Imprint* but also the reception of Miike's other works. When Western critics discuss Miike, a tendency that many of them cannot seem to avoid is to bring up the Japanese "cultural-historical" preoccupation with sex, violence and death, and then to wheel out Miike as "Exhibit A" of the newest generation of extreme cult Japanese filmmakers who have portrayed sex, violence and death for the consumption of fascinated Western audiences. In her standard textbook *A New History of Japanese Cinema* (2005), for example, Isolde Standish has nominated Miike's *Triad Society Trilogy* (1995-1999) alongside Kinji Fukasaku's *Battle Royale* films (2000; 2003) as exponents of a "postmodernist" sensibility of nihilism which infuses the newest wave of new Japanese cinema:

"Both groups of films register power in terms of violence and death. In Miike's films it is the sexualized body of the prostitute .... In Miike's film there is no redemptive humanism because his films form part of a postmodernist sensibility that, to draw on [Terry] Eagleton, portrays 'a world in which there is indeed no salvation, but on the other hand nothing to be saved.'" (338)

While I agree with Standish that the term "postmodernist" aptly applies to Miike, I am a bit uneasy that she should have equated postmodernism with nihilism and posited this particular aspect of postmodernism as Miike's defining characteristic. When a critic remarks that Miike is a "cult director" whose "works are indicative of a 'post-moral,' postmodernist, generational consciousness" (Standish 332), I cannot help but wonder if she is painting with too broad a brush. The description may be appropriate enough for Miike's "works" such as *Dead or Alive* (1999) and *Ichi the Killer*; but is the description still appropriate for Miike's other "works," which include, to name just a few recent examples:

- the whimsical feel-good drama *The Bird People of China* (1998);
- the wholesome family movie *Salaryman Kintaro* (1999);
- the bizarre horror musical-comedy *The Happiness of the Katakuris* (2002);



"I have made films that are not so abnormal." The whimsical feel-good drama *The Bird People of China*.



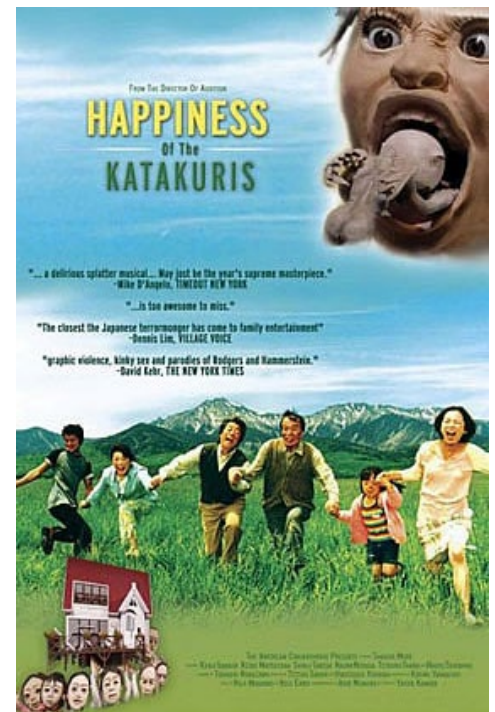
The wholesome family movie *Salaryman Kintaro*.



The teenage J-horror thriller *One Missed Call*.



The scenic historical buddy movie



The bizarre horror musical-comedy



*Sabu.*

*The Happiness of the Katakuris.*

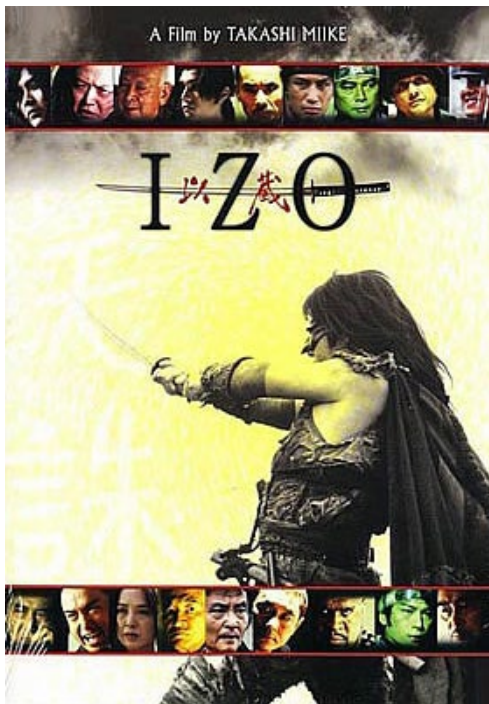
If a critic's perspective is limited to just one or two of Miike's films, what that indicates is probably the preoccupation of the critic rather than the preoccupation of Miike, who has understandably expressed both bemusement and impatience at the Western media's insistence on portraying him as an attention-seeking shock peddler from the East.[7]

Actually, I would go even further than this and argue that Miike may have made a more significant contribution to Japanese cinema than many of his critics have acknowledged. If conventional wisdom correctly posits that the history of Japanese cinema is divisible into "phases" of major movements and filmmakers, [8] I venture to propose that Takashi Miike may have as much importance for the last two decades of Japanese filmmaking as Akira Kurosawa has for the so-called "second golden age" of the 1950s and 1960s and Nagisa Oshima for the so-called "new wave" period of the 1960s and 1970s. I'd describe their differences as follows: Kurosawa's films stand out predominantly for their modernist humanism, Oshima's for their avant-garde politicism, and Miike's for their postmodernist pluralism.

When I use the term "postmodernist," though, I mean something a little different from Standish's usage. While I acknowledge that the postmodernist lack of fixed beliefs may constitute "post-moralism" and nihilism, I suggest that this negative view is valid only insofar as its positive counterpart is also valid. That is, a lack of fixed beliefs can also liberate one's mind from preconceptions



The nostalgic action-hero comedy *Zebaman*.



The philosophical time-travelling samurai action film *Izo*.

and enable one to appreciate the strength and merit of almost *any* belief. In my view, it is this positive aspect of postmodernism that Miike's filmmaking expresses. To cite one example, there are not many filmmakers who are equally at home making "cool" homophobic films like *Dead or Alive: Final* (2002) and "art house" homoerotic films like *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A*. More so with a Miike film than with almost any other director's film, the viewer should avoid concluding that a particular film defines what its director is "all about." The following self-assessment by Miike is worth bearing in mind when we watch his films:

"I think there are two types of directors. One is the type that is very careful of himself and chooses the subjects that fit him and that he really wants to do and he does them carefully. The other type does one thing after another and is not afraid of changing himself. He changes naturally while making these films one after another. I am the second type" (Mes and Sato par. 48).[9]

With the director's above self-characterization in mind, I have chosen to avoid Tom Mes' method of grouping Miike's films around totalizing common themes such as "the rootless individual," "the outcast," "the family unit," "the search for happiness," and so on (*Agitator* 23-31). Instead, I prefer to approach *Imprint* as an example of a film which expresses Miike's autonomy to do "one thing after another" and be "not afraid of changing himself." If, as Standish argues, *Shinjuku* exploits the "sexualized body of the prostitute" from a male perspective, I suggest that *Imprint* utilizes this "sexualized body" for a very different end. In this case, the film's perspective reflects the script's origin as a short story by a woman writer who has made women's experiences her focus and priority. In this respect, *Imprint* deserves recognition as a significant addition to Miike's busy résumé because the film has allowed him not only to trade on his reputation as a misogynist but also to adopt an explicitly gender-conscious position about the violence he shows. In *Imprint*, misogynistic violence is deployed as a strategy to satirize the phallogentrism in Kurosawa's masterpiece, *Rashomon*, and to expose the sexist Orientalist adulation of that masterpiece by Western audiences who may have accused Miike of misogyny and bad taste.

## From "Bokkee" to *Imprint*: Akutagawa, Kurosawa, and masternarratives

*Imprint* is based on the short story "Bokkee, Kyotee" (1999) by Japanese writer and cultural celebrity, Shimako Iwai.[10] "Bokkee, kyotee" is an Okayama idiom which translates as "really scary." Iwai was involved in the making of *Imprint*,





The sweet children's adventure fantasy *The Great Yokai War*.



The art-house homoerotic prison drama *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A*.

and her comments about what inspired her to write the story provide a useful context for understanding the film:

"I was trying to tell a sad story, not so much a scary one. But when I was finished, it was just plain scary. I was an unsuccessful author of young women's novels. And I wanted to return to prominence as an author. But I could not write. My private life suffered. And my husband and I were talking of divorce. Then I thought: 'women are so disadvantaged.' A sad existence that has nowhere to run or hide. I felt strongly about this. I thought I should write about women. I wanted to write about women and this is the story that resulted. Women with no place to escape" ("Imprinting" 1:40-2:41).

"Bokkee, Kyotee" is set in a brothel in one of Japan's dingy red-light districts during the Meiji period (1868-1912), and it reproduces a bedtime conversation between a young prostitute and her insomniac *danna* (master/patron). Two things are most distinctive about the story. First, the story is narrated not in standard Japanese but in Okayama dialect; second, the story has the form of a dramatic monologue in which only the words of the prostitute are recorded. The omission of the patron's part of the conversation means that readers must use their own imagination to fill in the gaps. This technique's effect is to strengthen readers' emotional engagement with the narrator and to intensify the voyeuristic feeling of the reading experience.

Several factors combine to give "Bokkee" its eerie, unsettling power, such as the decadent atmosphere of the historical setting and the cloying intimacy of the monologue format, enhanced by the coquettish tone and seemingly aimless flow of the narrator's words. Furthermore, a litany of horrors fills her artless chatter. The things she speaks about range in topics from starvation, disease, death, rape, incest, child abuse, abortion, sexual torture, and murder, to casual references to cesspools, bloodshed, demons, and hell — all of which seems to be treated by the narrator as ordinary occurrences of life. Ultimately, what constitutes the real horror is the disconnection between the sordidness of the narrator's life and her almost innocent acceptance of her lot. Though Iwai has added a supernatural twist to the story — the narrator has a "secret" which she eventually reveals — what's "really scary" remains the inexorable, irredeemable plight of a destitute, sexually exploited young woman.

The source of *Imprint* offers an interesting comparison with the source of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. *Rashomon* is based on two short stories, "Rashomon" and "Yabu no naka" ("In a Bamboo Grove"), by Japan's most celebrated short story writer, Ryunosuke Akutagawa.[11] Dubbed the Edgar Allen Poe of Japan, Akutagawa was the dominant literary figure of the Taisho period (1912-1926), and one of the first modern Japanese writers to gain fame outside of Japan (O'Connor 79; Keene, *Dawn* 556). Akutagawa's outlook was pervasively dark, morbid and cynical. Yet, like Poe, in some of his best works Akutagawa was able to maintain a virtuoso balance between Romantic grotesquerie and classical formalism. A genre for which Akutagawa is renowned is his retelling of traditional Japanese folktales with his own idiosyncratic modernist twists. The two stories on which *Rashomon* is based belong to this genre, and both stories can be described as austere vignettes expressing their author's cynical view on human egoism. Notably, the two stories also express a morbid cynicism about female nature, and they contain grotesque descriptions of violence towards women.

The first story, "Rashomon" (1915), from which Kurosawa entitled his film, has



The stylish cross-cultural epic Western comedy *Sukiyaki Western: Django*.

as a theme the collapse of moral idealism. The story begins with an impoverished young man toying with the idea of becoming a thief. While seeking shelter for the night in Rashomon Gate, the young man stumbles on the frightful sight of an old woman defiling a corpse by plucking out its hair. Shocked by her action, he cuts in and challenges her to explain herself. Gingerly, the old woman explains that she intends to make a wig from the hair. Since the dead woman (formerly her neighbor) used to make a living out of cheating others, explains the old woman, so she justly can do what the dead woman did to others in order to survive. On hearing this self-serving justification, the young man feels himself inflamed by a “new kind of courage” (Akutagawa 8). The story ends with his delivering a devastating *coup de grâce* against the old woman’s reasoning.

“You won’t blame me, then, for taking your clothes. That’s what I have to do to keep from starving to death” (Akutagawa 8-9).

The young man then strips the old woman of her kimono, kicks her roughly into the pile of dead bodies, and disappears into the night. While many critics have argued that Akutagawa has here offered a dispassionate and disinterested ethical inquiry,[12] contemporary readers could hardly overlook the gender dichotomy he has inscribed in order to bring out the new moral in this fractured morality tale. In a dog-eat-dog world of basic survival, a young man is educated out of morality by his encounter with two immoral women. The honest brutality of his masculine logic emerges morally superior to the dishonest brutality of the old woman’s feminine cunning.



Cover art of *Bokkee, Kyotee*, a collection of short stories by Shimako Iwai. *Imprint* is based on the title story.



Ryunosuke Akutagawa is the “Father of the Japanese short story.” His image appears in this 1999 commemorative 80-yen postage stamp. The characters on the left-hand side read “Rashomon.”

[Go to page 2](#)

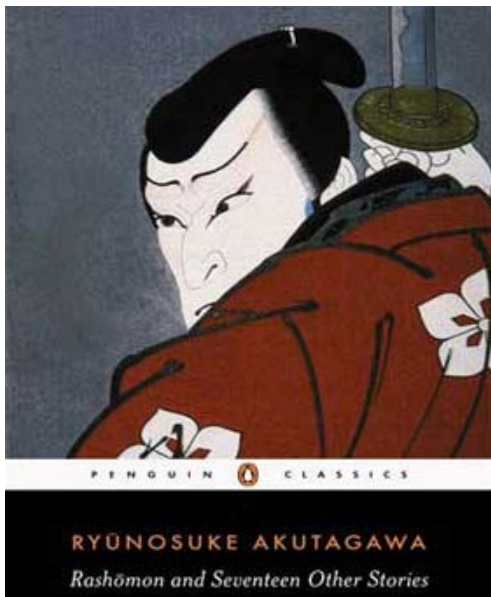


# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Manuscript of Akutagawa's short novel, *Haha* ("Mother"), from the U.C. Berkeley Library's collection.



Penguin Classics' edition of

The second story, "In a Bamboo Grove" (1921), from which Kurosawa borrowed his film's plot, is an eclectic record of seven witness statements about an incident surrounding a theft, a sexual assault, and a suspicious death. The three main players in the event are a bandit (arrested for theft, rape, and murder), a samurai (dead), and the samurai's wife (claiming to be raped). At critical points the seven testimonies are incompatible, even contradictory. But the story's strongest impact derives from a shocking revelation that Akutagawa delays until the end. The dead man gives the final testimony through a spiritual medium, and what makes the dead man's testimony so shocking is his revelation that the instigator of the crime is none other than the rape victim herself. According to the samurai, the woman has not only agreed to run away with the bandit but also incited the bandit to kill the samurai. Shocked and disgusted, the bandit kicks the woman to the ground, turns to the samurai, and asks:

"What do you want me to do with her? Kill her or let her go? Just nod to answer. Kill her?" (Akutagawa 18).

The samurai expresses gratitude to the bandit for a manly display of solidarity:

"For this if for nothing else, I am ready to forgive the bandit his crimes" (Akutagawa 18).

When the woman runs for her life, the bandit pursues her. The samurai, left alone in the bamboo grove, breaks down in tears and commits ritual suicide. The serenity and dignity of his self-sacrifice contrasts with the despicable determination of the woman to survive at any cost.

"I felt no pain at all .... The lonely glow of the sun lingered among the high branches of cedar and bamboo .... I lay there wrapped in a deep silence" (Akutagawa 19).

As with the earlier story "Rashomon," many critics have argued that Akutagawa's cynicism in "In a Bamboo Grove" objectively and indiscriminately expresses suspicion toward *every* speaker.[13][[open endnotes in new window](#)] However, this argument overlooks the story's unmistakable insistence on the woman's cunning and depravity. The samurai's final description of himself serenely fading into the bamboo grove brings the narrative arc back to the main title, and he leaves the inevitable impression that his account is more creditable than the woman's account.

In summary, "Rashomon" and "In a Bamboo Grove" express Akutagawa's cynical philosophy about the fallibility of "human nature" from an unapologetically masculinist perspective. David Boyd writes that there is no correlation between the two stories apart from the fact that Akutagawa used the medieval text *Konjaku Monogatari* (155) as his source for both stories. However, another correlation is surely the misogynistic emphases with which Akutagawa had rewritten the stories from *Konjaku*. [14] In his modernist retelling of these medieval folktales, Akutagawa had infused both tales with a strong animus towards female nature, as personified by the two women who forgo morality and resort to dirty tricks to save themselves. "Rashomon" and "In a Bamboo Grove" have an unnerving power that derives from Akutagawa's masterful use of a classic technique in storytelling: the twist in the tail. And in

Akutagawa's *Rashomon* and *Seventeen Other Stories*, with a new translation by Jay Rubin.

both tales, the force and timing of the twists are calculated to unsettle the readers and to leave in their mind a contemptuous view of the witch-like crone and the faithless whore.[15]



A Japanese poster for *Masters of Horror: Imprint*.



A U.S. poster for *Masters of Horror: Imprint*.



A Japanese poster for *Rashomon*.



An European poster for *Rashomon*.

Returning to the films: if we place Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and Takashi Miike's *Imprint* side by side, we can see that the creative backgrounds of the two films constitute a most interesting parallel. On the one hand, Kurosawa in 1950 adapted a 1921 short story by Japan's most renowned short story writer in the first film of his to reach a mass Western audience. On the other hand, Miike in 2006 adapted a 1999 short story by one of Japan's most popular woman writers in his first English-language film made for an U.S. network as a "master





Akira Kurosawa – director, *Rashomon*.

of horror.”[16] In addition, we could extend the parallel to include the screenplays of the two films. If adapting the multiple testimonies of “In a Bamboo Grove” into *Rashomon* was challenging enough for Kurosawa and his co-writer Shinobu Hashimoto, then adapting the meandering dramatic monologue of “Bokkee, Kyotee” into *Imprint* was probably even more challenging for writer Daisuke Tengan. The story “Bokkee” had a reputation for being *zettai ni eigaka fukanoo*: “absolutely unfilmable” (*Imprint Official Homepage*, “Introduction” par. 3). In the end, what makes Shimako Iwai’s unfilmable short story “filmable” is the revision undertaken by Tengan. That script so impressed Iwai that she declared she was “very satisfied with the script” (“Imprinting” 6:17), and she judged the film to be “better than the book!” (“Imprinting” 5:57)[17] Significantly, one of the changes introduced by Tengan to make “Bokkee” filmable is to transform the story into an existential quest for “truth,” a plot structure similar to the one which underpins Kurosawa’s and Hashimoto’s adaptation of the Akutagawan stories.



Ryunosuke Akutagawa - author, “*Rashomon*” and “*In a Bamboo Grove*.”



Shimako Iwai – author, “*Bokkee, Kyotee*.”

Comments by Miike add weight to the theory that *Rashomon* is a relevant reference text for *Imprint*. In an interview for *The Japan Times*, Miike describes the themes of *Imprint*:

“People tell all sorts of lies .... You hide your instinctive self and instead create a social self with lies .... What’s scary is when you strip all the lies away to get at the essential you. What if it’s pure evil? You don’t want to face that. So lies aren’t all bad — we need them to live” (Schilling, “Takashi” par. 10).

As a philosophical reflection on truth and human nature, these ideas are almost identical to the conversation between the Priest and Commoner in *Rashomon*:



Takashi Miike – director, *Imprint*.



Shinobu Hashimoto – scriptwriter, *Rashomon*.

Commoner: "Men are only men. That's why they lie. They can't tell the truth, not even to themselves."

Priest: "That may be true. But it's because men are so weak. That's why they lie. That's why they must deceive themselves" (Richie, *Rashomon* 63).

Kurosawa's comments about *Rashomon* are similar:

"Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves .... They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing .... [They] cannot survive without lies to make them feel they are better people than they really are" (Kurosawa 183).

Accordingly, it is possible to see some common themes running through *Imprint* and *Rashomon*. Human nature is corrupt and egotistical; human beings disguise their own corruption with civilized lies; human beings are unable and unwilling to be completely honest with themselves. The similarity is so far, so good. The crucial difference, however, lies in the conclusion that Miike reaches in the interview:

"But the heroine is blameless .... She didn't ask to be this way. She deserves our sympathy" (Schilling, "Takashi" par. 11).

Though it may be easier for us to believe that this comment came from a director famous for his benevolent humanism rather than from a director infamous for his radical misogyny, it is Kurosawa's Commoner who goes on to explain:

"Women lead you on with their tears; they even fool themselves" (Richie, *Rashomon* 68).

In *Rashomon*, the woman Masago is depicted as no less complicitous in the cycle of duplicity and corruption than the bandit who rapes her and the samurai husband who spurns her. Significantly, an early draft of Hashimoto's screenplay for *Rashomon* was called "Male-Female" (Kurosawa 181). The film teaches a masculinist lesson that women, beneath their veneer of virtue and chastity, are selfish at heart and whorish by nature. As Joan Mellen observes about the image of Masago,

"Woman is the angel outside and demon within" (*Waves* 47).

Even though Masago appears as flawless as a "bodhisattva" (Akutagawa 13), she reveals herself to be a lustful, treacherous and malevolent whore who hates men for knowing the awful "truth" about her. To save herself, this whorish woman would resort to any trickery and cruelty, even encourage men to kill one another.

This negative conclusion in *Rashomon*, however, is both acknowledged and challenged in *Imprint*. In one respect, *Imprint* takes up the story from where *Rashomon* leaves off: all its women are whores. But in another respect, *Imprint* also utilizes the first film's negative conclusion for its own purpose. It not only introduces us to a whore who is completely innocent but also proceeds to ask who and what are responsible for making women like her feel guilty about



Daisuke Tengan – scriptwriter, *Imprint*.

themselves. If my interpretation is correct, then *Imprint* as a horror film may be said to address a specifically female experience of horror. It shows that what's "really scary" — more so than imaginary phantoms, demons and bogeymen — is the reality of male control and subjugation of women. To reinstate Iwai's original question: what if women find that they have "no place to escape"? Short of killing herself, what could a woman subjected to male exploitation do to act "right" in the eyes of men?

When Miike was asked to comment on the frequent complaints about his films' "misogyny," he offered an answer that is in part *mea culpa* and in part self-defense:

"Generally if the audience feel that it's like that, then they are right .... I don't think that there is only one way to look at a film. There isn't one truth. I always try to have some kindness for the female characters. I allow them to try to realize their own desire for example. But generally I feel no need to explain my films to an audience .... I'm not always sure that I was able to make my feelings clear enough in a film, so if the audience misunderstands it, it's okay. I accept the misunderstanding" (Mes, *Agitator* 363).

Miike's answer is double-edged. On the one hand, he accepts the blame; on the other hand, he blames his critics for misunderstanding him. One way of accounting for this dual explanation is to refer it back to Miike's description of himself as an adaptable filmmaker (Mes and Sato par. 48). Since Miike's approach to filmmaking is to "[do] one thing after another" and to "chang[e] himself" with every project, to accuse him of being "misogynistic" on account of his having made some undoubtedly misogynistic films would be both correct and incorrect.[18]

However, Kurosawa presents a different kind of case since he is a much more formal, auteurist filmmaker. Like Miike, Kurosawa has often been taken to task for his problematic depiction of women. To appreciate the justice of this criticism, one needs only to go through his long catalogue of stereotypical females, ranging from

- the ice maiden Princess Yuki in *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) to
- the vain seductress Shino in *Seven Samurai* (1954) to
- the nameless mad woman in the attic in *Red Beard* (1965) to
- the murderous harpies Asaji in *Throne of Blood* (1957) and Kaede in *Ran* (1985) to
- the soft/hard-hearted harlots Oshin and Kikuno in *The Sea is Watching* (2002) (this last film is based on Kurosawa's posthumous screenplay).

Kurosawa has frankly acknowledged that he had only made two films — *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946) and *Rashomon* — in which he "ever fairly and fully portrayed a woman" (Richie and Mellen 40). In his autobiography, Kurosawa has almost nothing to say about women, and the little that he has to say are mostly sentimental reflections about his "gentle and kind" sister and "impossibly heroic" mother (Kurosawa 18; 21). Though Kurosawa's avoidance of "chick flicks" may very well attract some fans, Stephen Prince's critique is apt: Kurosawa's indifference to women is "a major limitation of his work" (Prince 78).

Thus, if neither Kurosawa nor Miike can claim to specialize in "women's



"Woman is the angel outside and demon within": Machiko Kyo as Masago.

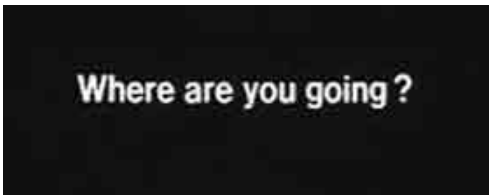




“[T]he heroine is blameless”: Youki Kudoh as Woman.



“She deserves our sympathy.” Michie Ito as Komomo.



The final shot of *Dead or Alive 2: Birds* leaves audiences to ponder a universal existential question: “Where are you going?” But is such a question relevant to women with “no place to escape”?

pictures,” I suggest that it is Miike’s postmodernist approach to filmmaking and lack of reservations about letting women “realize their own desire” that makes him capable of embracing a project as unusual as *Imprint*. In contrast, I think most people would agree that Kurosawa is what Miike calls the “first type” of director, i.e., a director

“very careful of himself and [who] chooses the subjects that fit him and that he really wants to do and ... does them carefully” (Mes and Sato par. 48).

As Kurosawa states in the final sentence of his autobiography:

“There is nothing that says more about its creator than the work itself” (Kurosawa 189).

And what Kurosawa’s work “says” about their creator can be inferred from the fact that none of his major films is about women or is based on material by women. And the only Kurosawa film (*No Regrets for Our Youth*) in which a woman takes centre stage may as well be gender-neutral since it

“merely extends the social roles and narrative functions usually assumed by men in his cinema to a woman” (Prince 78).

Even though Miike may seem worse than Kurosawa when it comes to “misogynistic” filmmaking, ironically many of the viewers who have condemned *Imprint* have embraced Miike’s other films. Yet the violence and misogyny in these other films is often much more exploitative and gratuitous. In *Dead or Alive* and *Full Metal Yakuza* (1997), for example, Mariko and Yukari’s rape, torture and death are used exploitatively as showpieces and plot catalysts to drive the angst-ridden male heroes to take manly actions. Likewise in *Ichi the Killer*, Sara and Myu-myu have no reason to exist other than to lend themselves to being raped, beaten, tortured and killed. In addition, even Miike’s less violent films are not necessarily less misogynistic. For example, *Dead or Alive 2: Birds* (2000) is a relatively subdued film about two hit-men revisiting their old neighborhood, a film which film scholar Randolph Jordan has called Miike’s “finest work to date” (par. 31). The script leaves audiences to ponder an existential question in its final frame: “Where are you going?” However, an assumption which *D/A 2: Birds* entrenches, and which Jordan is happy to endorse, is that a script can unproblematically present a narrative exclusively for and about men as a universal narrative about

“regeneration through the cycle of birth and death, and the importance of understanding one’s own context in the world in order to facilitate change” (Jordan par. 27).

While, “Where are you going?” may be a relevant question for the film’s male protagonists (and by extension, the film’s male viewership), the question may be less relevant for female viewers and female characters who are controlled by men and have “no place to escape.” To problematize this issue is to challenge the naturalization of the male perspective that so many of Miike’s other films take for granted. And it is a challenge that *Imprint* has taken up with a vengeance.

Watching *Imprint* as an implicit commentary on Miike’s own films, then, is as profitable as watching it as an explicit commentary on *Rashomon*: “the most honored of all Japanese films” (Richie, *A Hundred* 139). *Rashomon*’s aim is to draw audiences into a serene epistemological meditation upon truth, guilt and human nature. In contrast, *Imprint*’s aim is to provoke audiences into questioning masculinist assumptions underlying established ways of perceiving truth, guilt and human nature. Placed side by side, the two films clear the field



for an ideological contest between two different generations of Japanese thinkers. It is an ideological contest which pits three venerable Fathers (Akutagawa, Hashimoto, Kurosawa) against one unruly Daughter (Iwai) and two prodigal Sons (Tengan, Miike).

[Go to page 3](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



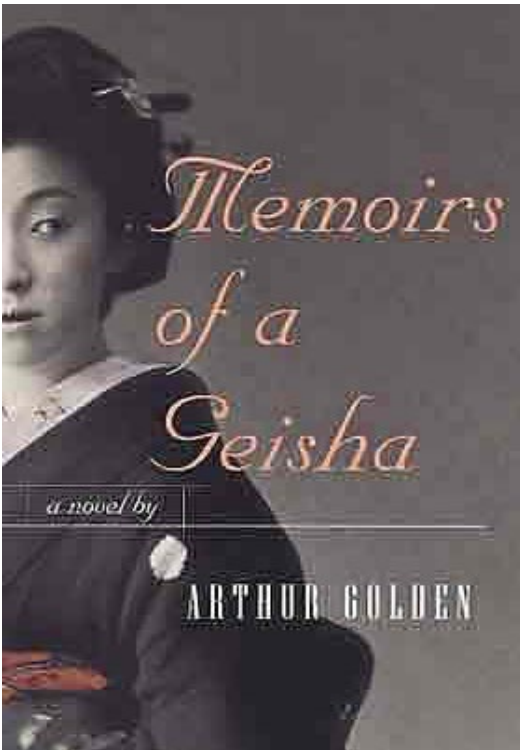
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A famous imprint of Japan: Katsushika Hokusai's "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" from the *ukiyo-e* series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*.



A geisha girl in kimono: the cover of a recent edition of Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

## Imprinting Orientalism: white USA and Kurosawa-phililia

"*Imprint*, *n* 1.a A figure impressed or imprinted upon something; a mark produced by pressure on a surface; an impression, stamp. b. *Fig.* A character impressed upon something; an attribute communicated by, and constituting evidence of, some agency; 'stamp', 'impression'. c. A representation or type of something .... 5. An onset, assault, charge." — *Oxford English Dictionary*

Apart from its concerns with gender and sexual violence, *Imprint* has another polemical aspect, which stems partly from the film's anomalous entity as a Japanese film funded by a mainstream U.S. cable network specifically for U.S. viewers. The meaning of *Imprint*'s English title may seem cryptic at first, since there is nothing explicit in the story to indicate how it is about "imprint." However, an analysis of that title can reveal how forcefully and succinctly it expresses the film's polemical concerns.

*Oxford English Dictionary* offers several definitions of "imprint" (both as a noun and a verb) and the most relevant two definitions are: "the condition of being printed" and "a representation or type of something." We can further dissect the word "imprint" into two parts: "im-" and "print." First, the word "print" can suggest the pages of a book or the rolls of a film. But in relation to Japan, the word also evokes culturally specific images such as the printed scrolls of Japanese art/calligraphy and the printed patterns on a geisha's kimono. Second, the prefix "im-" summons many other associative words pertaining to visualization and representation: e.g. "im-age," "im-position," "im-pression," "im-primatur." In sum, the word "imprint" signals that a major theme of the film is about the way Japanese culture (as mediated through literary and cinematic texts) is "imprinted" in the minds of the film's target audience. More explicitly, the film is about the way that white America has utilized "impressions" of Japanese culture for their fetishist enjoyment. *Imprint* challenges Showtime viewers to ask themselves: How much do Americans know and care about Japan beyond what it is comfortable and convenient for Americans to know and care?

And no discussion of U.S. attitudes toward Japan is complete without saying something about Akira Kurosawa. Since making his name in the West by winning the Golden Lion for *Rashomon* at the Venice Film Festival in 1951, Kurosawa has been hailed as an icon not only of Asian cinema but also of world cinema, enjoying such honorific titles as "Father," "Master" and "Emperor." [19][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Yet, against what amounts to a popular and critical consensus on the



*Rashomon* won Master Kurosawa the Grand Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1951.



Honoring the Emperor: Kurosawa with George Lucas and Steven Spielberg at the 62nd (1989) Academy Awards, where Kurosawa received an honorary Oscar.

universality of Kurosawa's greatness, it is worth noting that *Rashomon* had a far less enthusiastic initial reception in Japan than in the West. [20]Donald Richie has identified several Japanese reviewers who were puzzled by *Rashomon*'s acclaim and who sought to explain Westerners' embrace of the film as symptomatic of Westerners' fascination with Japan's "exoticism" (Richie, *Rashomon* 20). Whether these responses are attributable to *Rashomon*'s being too "analytic, logical and speculative" to be compatible with "patterns of Japanese thought" (Richie, *Rashomon* 20) is debatable. Yet, *Rashomon*'s subsequent canonization as one of world cinema's greatest masterpieces raises an interesting question about the process of cinematic canonization. Could Western critics all along have understood better than Japanese critics what constitutes "great" cinema, or could other factors (cultural, economic, political, for example) determine what films would become masterpieces of world cinema?

In a recent article, Rachael Hutchinson has challenged the popular view of Kurosawa as a politically neutral director who made films about the "universal human condition." She finds that such a view overlooks elements in Kurosawa's films which reflect his complex engagement from Western culture and politics:

"The fact that Kurosawa worked under the constraints of Occupation censorship provides the opportunity to examine ... questions of power structures and the possibility of counter-discourse" (173).

Still, if Western critics tend to speak in essentializing terms about Kurosawa, they might in part be following a tendency that Kurosawa himself encouraged. Kurosawa's negative comments about the lukewarm reaction of his countrymen and countrywomen to *Rashomon*'s international success demonstrate that Kurosawa's talent as a foreign diplomat might have been every part as masterful as his talent as a filmmaker. He lamented that Japanese people "have no confidence in the worth of Japan," "elevate everything foreign," and "denigrate everything Japanese" (Kurosawa 187), a lamentation which expertly neutralizes Japanese rejection of Westerners' patronage by characterizing such dissent as a *Japanese* cultural weakness.

Without denying Kurosawa's genius as a filmmaker, one could still argue that by keeping the focus of his major films "universal" and any sensitive political commentary covert, Kurosawa has made it much easier for Westerners to embrace and celebrate his genius. The problem is that we cannot easily separate reverence and patronage. As Greg M. Smith observes, *Rashomon*'s positive reception in the West was broadly definable in relation to three emphases:

- emphasis on the "Japaneseness" of the film;
- emphasis on the "universal" relevance of Kurosawa's art; and
- emphasis on the powerful (over)acting of Toshiro Mifune, who plays Tajomaru the bandit.

The strategy used in foreign promotion of *Rashomon* even included a blatant emphasis on the exotic beauty of Machiko Kyo, who plays Masago the wife (Smith par. 41).





Kurosawa with Francis Ford Coppola.



Kurosawa directs Toshiro Mifune on the set of *Yojimbo*.



Miike directs Billy Drago and Youki Kudoh on the set of *Imprint*.

Accordingly: if it is not too simplistic and cynical to argue that U.S. interest in foreigners seldom reveals itself as anything more than an occasional tendency to satisfy U.S. fascination with the “other,” then the cult of Kurosawa-appreciation in the United States must be one of the most pervasive yet respectable manifestations of this tendency. White America loves Kurosawa, and no section of white America loves Kurosawa more than white male Hollywood filmmakers.[21] In fact, Hollywood’s general disregard and ignorance of all things non-American seem to run in curious parallel to Hollywood’s singular reverence and possessiveness of all things Kurosawa. Yet, underlying the adulation, there remains here an elitist, essentially paternalistic attitude: claiming *one* Japanese master as America’s darling is sufficient to pass for a complete, profound mastery of “Japan” and “Asia.” Even recent Hollywood fads towards the production of Asian-friendly cinema may simply be perpetuating Hollywood’s familiar habit of Japonism and J-ploitation. Examples of such production can be found, on the one hand, in gaudy period pieces such as Edward Zwick’s *The Last Samurai* (2003) and Rob Marshall’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), and, on the other hand, in quirky genre pieces such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003) and Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003)[22].

Against this background, a clearer view emerges as to why *Imprint* can be read as a satirical critique of white America’s fantasies about Japan. When Miike was asked by *IGN.com* to explain why he thinks Japanese horror films are catching on in the United States, he gave a rather intriguing answer. Though the English translation is obviously very poor here, his answer is still worth quoting in full because it represents a rare instance when he has addressed this issue directly:

"It's very interesting because since I'm in Japan, the way that American people selected Japanese horror, is something I don't understand why they [are] so attracted to Japanese horror these days, because I'm in Japan. And also it's maybe the same for the other Japanese directors, why they are so popular in America now [is] that people pay so much attention to them. So it's something like there's a big wonder why. It just happens to be that way now. It might be the reason why, in Japanese horror, in the stories, it always has the 'hateness,' you always bring the feelings of the hate. It's very new to American audience, that kind of feelings of hate that you don't see in American cinema. But also Japanese horror has such lower budgets than the American film budget, in the way that the set or location is so simple that you can do so many things on the one location or one set. Maybe if we appear to the American Hollywood people, that's it's very new things that it's taking place [in] only one place" (Otto par. 10).

From the above grammatical muddle it is possible to extract the following points:

- Miike is surprised by the popularity of J-horror in the United States;
- he thinks that a possible reason is Americans' fascination with



Miike with Quentin Tarantino and Kaori Momoi in a press conference for *Django*: "We wanted to show the world that Japanese actors could make movies in English and not 'lose' to *Memoirs of a Geisha*."



Miike with Eli Roth and chainsaws.

something "new;"

- he observes that the meager budget of Japanese films has created an environment which forces Japanese filmmakers to devise ways to do more with less.

But more importantly, Miike's explanation also raises a question: What would a Japanese director do if an U.S. network gives him a bigger than usual budget to make a horror film specifically to satisfy U.S. viewers' appetite for J-horror? And he went on to provide a practical answer to such a question by making *Imprint*.

The correlation between text and creative context in this instance is, I think, even more fascinating than that of, say, Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976). That film, like *Imprint*, is controversial and made by a big-name Japanese director who had the assistance of foreign investment. Oshima seems to have served his benefactors well by delivering a Japanese-language film about Japan offensive to Japan and delightful to the West. In contrast, Miike seems to have bitten the very hands that fed him. He has made a film in English and without subtitles for primary U.S. consumption. But he has also chosen a story in which the "listener" to the tale (the American) turns out be harboring a "secret" that the tale discloses. In other words, the basic story may be read allegorically against the very conditions of production that allowed Miike to make it. His production for U.S. television nominally enables the regular U.S. viewer to relish the sadomasochistic perversity of the Japanese "other," but it turns out to be a satire on the obsessive perversity of the Americans themselves.

Indeed, it is tempting to make further conjectures on the basis of other information. On several occasions, Miike has shown signs of being both amused and annoyed that Western audiences are interested to know him only as an exotic shock-and-gore filmmaker.[23] Moreover, the irony that an U.S. studio should have invited him to participate in the *Masters of Horror* franchise as a "token Asian" amidst a straight lineup of Euro-American masters was probably not completely lost on him.[24] Some of this awareness could have informed his creative decisions and led him to use ironic commentary as a resistance strategy. Undoubtedly, the most conspicuous aspect of *Imprint*'s outlandishness is its language. Anyone watching *Imprint* is bound to wonder at some stage what on earth drove a non-English speaking filmmaker to do a Japanese period piece in English, especially when a major strength of "Bokkee, Kyotee" derives from Iwai's effective use of the Okayama dialect.[25] While almost every critic has dismissed his using an English soundtrack as an outcome of Miike's thoughtlessness or buckling to commercial pressure, [26] I'd like to offer a more critically responsive view.

Experimental multilingualism is a major device in many Miike films, and the only reason that it has not generally been perceived as a weakness by Western viewers is that the experimental multilingualism has mostly been done with Asian languages.[27] In *Shinjuku Triad Society*, *Ichi the Killer* and *Dead or Alive: Final*, various characters speak in Mandarin, Cantonese and Korean. Yet Western fans have generally accepted these devices as uncontroversial and unproblematic.



DVD cover of *Masters of Horror: Imprint* (U.S. release).

A good reason for their acceptance is that, for monolingual English-speakers who watch Miike's films with subtitles, the difference between Chinese, Japanese and Korean may simply yield to the opaque impression that the languages are "non-English." As far as these viewers are concerned, the experience of watching a Miike film is, at least in terms of its language, not very much different from the experience of watching *any* non-English film. The non-English film is deemed culturally "authentic" because the monolingual English-speaker has neither the knowledge nor the interest to authenticate the film. But something that monolingual English-speaking viewers seldom need to think about is that what strikes them as natural about their conception of English vs. non-English may not necessarily pertain to viewers who know English as a second language. In discussing this issue, Miike has used Steven Spielberg's masterpiece *Schindler's List* (1993) as an example of a mainstream Hollywood film which demonstrates this linguistic Anglo-centricism:



The truth-seeking Western male: Billy Drago as Christopher.

"For us Japanese people, it's very strange to hear the Germans speak English in *Schindler's List*. Of course for the market it's better to make the movie in English, but with such a big budget movie you would imagine they would have no trouble hiring real German actors. So if we can accept Germans speaking English, why not a Japanese character who speaks Chinese?" (Mes, *Agitator* 368)

*Imprint*, accordingly, turns the table on the Anglo-centric monolingual English-speakers. It leads U.S. Showtime viewers to recognize that English is a global, heterogeneous language, and that no single audience can claim to have a monopoly on how that language is used. Rather than perpetuating the expectation that non-native English-speaking actors must learn how to speak English with "correct" U.S. accents, the film forces its native English-speaking viewers to adjust to a distinctive form of Japanized-English: a feat that Miike would develop further in his next film, *Sukiyaki Western: Django* (2007).[28] The result, I argue, does not indicate an artistic compromise or a lapse of creative judgment. Rather, it indicates a wickedly clever recognition of what it takes to create a satirical Japanese-Americana. Even as *Imprint* carries to





The truth-hiding Eastern female: Youki Kudoh as Woman.



Eiko Matsuda as Sada in Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*.



Arguably the second most famous Japanese film after *Rashomon* ...

absurd length the conceit that rural peasants in Meiji Japan would communicate in mangled American-English, the film is forcing this conceit upon its Showtime viewers (understood by perhaps a few viewers as “anachronism”) to swallow the conceit whole. The joke is on everyone who is prepared to watch *Imprint* and to pretend that the whole conceit does make sense.[29]

## Interpreting *Imprint*: “objective” aestheticism versus “sadistic” aestheticism

At this point, I would like to offer a close reading of *Imprint* to clarify the film’s radical, visceral argument. The most noticeable change the script made to the short story “Bokkee, Kyotee” is the addition of a new major character, Christopher Karges. In “Bokkee,” the narrator’s patron exists offstage throughout her monologue. In the film, Karges is portrayed as a fair-skinned, blond-haired, welkin-eyed U.S. traveler by the actor Billy Drago, whom Muike handpicked for the role on account of his “distinctive features” (“Imprinting” 6:30).[30] Christopher’s namesake is possibly Christopher Columbus, the great European explorer who braved the treacherous seas to “discover America” but had no similar luck with Japan, for which he famously mistook Haiti.[31] Our Columbus, though, is an unexceptional U.S. newspaperman traveling on a leaky boat to find Komomo (played by Michie Ito), the Japanese girl he loved and lost. At the outset, the narrative premise involves an Arian Last Samurai seeking to reclaim his Madame Butterfly,[32] or at least, to claim control of the “truth” about her.

Christopher’s journey takes him to a seedy rural brothel. Interestingly, the brothel is set on a desolate island, which could be a metaphor for Japan’s geographic status as an island country. In the brothel, he encounters a disfigured prostitute (played by Youki Kudoh), known only as “Woman” (*Onna*). When Christopher hears from Woman that Komomo was working in the brothel and passed away a short while ago, he demands to be told the “truth” about Komomo’s death. Woman then proceeds to tell Christopher three versions of the story. This multiple narrative structure explicitly mirrors the narrative structure of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*. Like *Rashomon*, *Imprint* tells a story about a central event concerning a theft, a sexual assault and a suspicious death. Like *Rashomon*, *Imprint* uses conflicting versions of the central event to offer an argument about the elusiveness of truth and justice. But one significant way in which *Imprint* differs from *Rashomon* is the way it uses sexual violence to express its central argument about women.

Before I examine this issue in relation to the most controversial scene in *Imprint* (i.e. the torture of Komomo), it is useful to make some general comments about the portrayal of sexual violence in Japanese cinema. That Japanese cinema has a rich subculture of bizarre, violent erotica



... *In the Realm* can be understood as “an outgrowth not only of Oshima’s concern with sexuality, politics, and identity, but also in its relationship to ... the ‘pink’ film.”



Kurosawa’s *Red Beard* has a confronting surgery scene which uses the body of a bound naked woman to display the male hero/doctor’s medical skills (*Red Beard* is played by Toshiro Mifune).



Komomo is bound and tortured by her fellow prostitutes.

should be obvious to anyone who has opened a copy of Jack Hunter’s *Eros in Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema* (1998). One of the most prominent expressions of this subculture is the *pinku eiga*, or the “pink film:” a popular genre of sexploitation films which arose in the 1960s and which specialized in portraying almost every variety of sexual fetishes even as the films themselves skirted around actual displays of genitals and copulation.[33] Although most pink films are clearly exploitative in their portrayal of women, some filmmakers such as Shohei Imamura, Koji Wakamatsu and Nagisa Oshima have also been known to use the *pinku eiga* genre to “[question] the establishment” and to “pursu[e] revolutionary politics of the extreme left” (Harritz par. 21). And the most famous erotic film in Japanese cinema is undoubtedly Oshima’s *In the Realm of the Senses*, first screened unedited in the Cannes Film Festival in 1976. It is arguably the next most famous Japanese film in the West after *Rashomon*. As David Desser observes, we should seek to understand *In the Realm*

“as an outgrowth not only of Oshima’s concern with sexuality, politics, and identity, but also in its relationship to ... the ‘pink’ film” (*Eros* 98).

For Western audiences familiar with *In the Realm*, the Komomo torture scene is likely to trigger associations with Oshima’s film. For example, Komomo’s red kimono is reminiscent of the red kimono worn by Sada in *In the Realm*’s final scene,[34] and Komomo’s torture by the gang of prostitutes is reminiscent of the first film’s mock wedding scene in which a young geisha is raped by her fellow geishas using a bird-shaped dildo. Yet, as radical as Oshima’s film is in its representation of a woman as a dominant desiring agent, numerous critics have argued that *In the Realm*’s construction of female desire as solely dependent on the phallus makes the film unmistakably phallogentric.[35] If this criticism is valid, then something that the two most celebrated “masterpieces” of Japanese cinema — *Rashomon* and *In the Realm* — have in common with the less reputable *pinku eiga* genre is their male-centered examination of female sexuality. Yet, as I shall argue, while *Imprint* explicitly appropriates this tradition of phallogentricism, it also departs from the tradition by leading audiences to question their own phallogentric voyeurism.[36]

[Go to page 4](#)

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Masago succumbs to a kiss by her rapist Tajomaru.



Komomo has knitting needles inserted into her gum by a sadistic prostitute, played by author Shimako Iwai.



Masago's eyes widen in ecstasy.

*Rashomon's* centerpiece is a scene depicting the rape of a woman, Masago. Similarly, *Imprint's* centerpiece is a scene depicting the sexualized torture of a woman, Komomo. However, *Imprint* replaces *Rashomon's* stately “objective” depiction of sexual violence with a sadistic “subjective” depiction of sexual violence: *Rashomon's* measured rhythm and stately monochromism give way to *Imprint's* disorientating frame-jumping and exaggerated colorfulness. Kurosawa's classical restraint — enabled by *omitting* Masago's rape in favor of the sexual metaphor of a phallic dagger and circling sunlight — becomes Miike's sumptuous visual feast of aesthetic sadomasochism. Unlike Kurosawa's camera, which politely averts our view from the violence, Miike's camera closes in on the violence right down to the droplets of blood welling underneath Komomo's fingernails.

And the point of *Imprint's* radical revision of *Rashomon's* rape scene is arguably to ask the question: should audiences be more troubled by a strategy that exploitatively depicts the victimization of women (*Imprint*), or by a strategy that naturalizes violence to the extent that violence becomes non-violence and victims become non-victims (*Rashomon*)? Kurosawa's strategy of normalizing Masago's rape as romantic and natural — suggesting that Masago asked to be raped all along; that a woman saying “no” is really a woman meaning “yes” — is replaced by Miike's strategy of blatant objectification which renders Komomo's consent irrelevant and “objective” viewing impossible. The spectacle of a woman perfectly dressed in white succumbing to lust for her rapist is caricatured in the spectacle of a woman scantily dressed in red being graphically mutilated by ropes, incense sticks and knitting needles. Yet, if *Rashomon* suppresses violence to the point of suggesting that rape is not really rape, *Imprint* is so exaggerated in its insistence on violence that it draws attention to its own devices, and ultimately, the violence in the film functions as a radical critique of the strategy of suppression in *Rashomon*.

In *Rashomon*, an “objective” system of criminal law is introduced to show a guilty woman manipulating the “truth” and thereby incriminating herself. In *Imprint*, a perverse system of criminal law is introduced to force an innocent woman to fabricate her guilt in order to save herself from inhumane persecution. Komomo clearly did not steal the ring, but the “justice” being dealt upon her is such that the “truth” really did not matter. Komomo pleads with her torturers:

“I'm sorry. I was me. I took it ... Please forgive me ... It hurts ... Have mercy” (Tengan 19-20).

By juxtaposing a perverse system of law against a system of law that presents itself as “objective,” *Imprint* thus draws attention to *Rashomon's* construction of “objectivity.” *Imprint* makes no pretence about the exploitative nature of what it presents: Komomo's torture explicitly gratifies male desire by portraying erotic girl-on-girl actions even as it exonerates male responsibility by making all the torturers female. What *Imprint* does not do, though, is to construct rape as romantic and natural, and then “objectively” blame the victim for being a liar and an agent of her own violation!

Still, Komomo's torture is so excessive that it remains necessary to explain how





Komomo's eyes widen in agony.

the scene differs from ordinary slasher porn. Even though one may not completely agree with Mes' generalization that "[t]he sex scenes in Takashi Miike's films do not exist to arouse ... but define the characters and the lives they lead" (*Agitator* 32), his observation is at least useful for revising the popular view that Miike mindlessly purveys gratuitous sex and violence. For one thing, the scene is unlike ordinary slasher porn which seeks to dehumanize its victims: on the contrary, the purpose of the scene is to *show* the very human Komomo being subjected to dehumanization. As Miike explains to Mick Garriss:

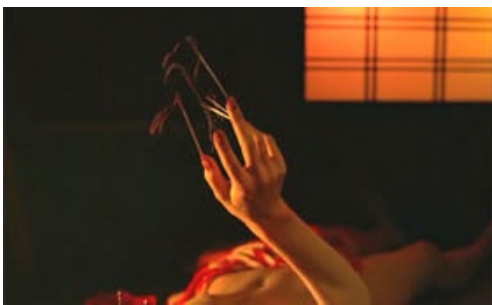
"The worse the violence against [the victim], the more sympathetic we are to her" (Mes and Vuckovic 19).[37][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

In addition, by insisting on violence rather than censoring violence, the scene highlights and offsets the more subtle form of dehumanization that Masago undergoes in *Rashomon*. [38]



Masago's fingers loosen on her defensive dagger against a backdrop of sunlight.

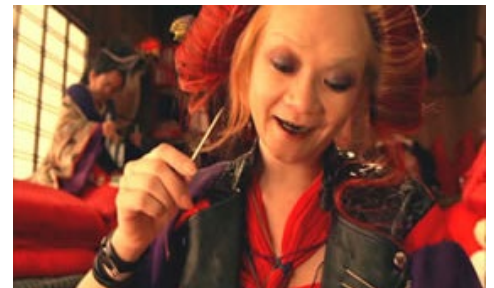
Furthermore, if *Imprint* treads a very thin line between polemic and porn, another factor helps tilt the film to the right side of the line: that factor is the cameo appearance by author Shimako Iwai as Komomo's torturer. Cameos are not uncommon in Miike's films — *Izo*, for example, is virtually a roll-call of big names from Japan's entertainment industry — but sometimes they can come across as tacky. For example, in *Agitator* (2002), Miike provocatively cast himself as a gang leader who uses a microphone to sodomize a bargirl. And in Eli Roth's *The Hostel* (2005), Miike plays a client emerging from a torture compound to deliver the self-mocking line: "You could spend all your money in there." Unlike these gimmicky cameos, however, the appearance of the story's author Shimako Iwai in *Imprint* is a masterstroke of polemical precision and perspicacity.[39] The casting takes Foucault's theory of the legitimizing functions of authorship (Foucault 159) and turns the actor playing the torturer into an active legitimizing strategy. With Iwai's inclusion, the creative rationale of the scene changes from a questionable rationale involving a male filmmaker eroticizing sexual violence — Miike did admit that he cast Michie on the basis that she is someone he could "imagine falling in love with" ("Imprinting" 9:08) — into a legitimate rationale involving a male filmmaker assisting a female author to mount a radical polemic *about* sexual violence. In contrast, *Rashomon*'s message hinges on the audiences' complete obeisance to the objective authorities of the master-author Akutagawa and master-filmmaker Kurosawa. Even if Kurosawa could have resurrected the author of "In a Bamboo Grove" to play Tajomaru, the idea of master Akutagawa playing a liar, thief and rapist would still be too sacrilegious to entertain!



Komomo's mutilated fingers stretch out against a backdrop of shadows.



Shimako Iwai as Komomo's torturer.



"I wonder about her past."

Furthermore, as a film made for white U.S. audiences, *Imprint* appropriates two other mediums of J-pop that white America has taken to heart: manga and anime. *Imprint*'s combination of surrealistic fantasy, stylized eroticism and



Masago's hand lovingly fondles Tajomaru's back.



Komomo's hand struggles against her strangler, and detects the presence of "Sister" inside Woman's head.



History of Meiji taught through anime costumes ...

extreme violence brings to mind various anime films to have become popular in the West. Alternately, *Imprint* comes across every bit as enchanting as Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001), as thrilling as Yoshiaki Kawajiri's *Ninja Scroll* (1993), as eerie as Hiroshi Harada's *Midori* (1992), and as exploitative as Kan Fukumoto's *La Blue Girl* (1992).[40] Yet, *Imprint* does more than just adopt anime's visual sensibilities. A central anime motif, one should note, is its exaggerated idealization of Euro-Caucasian beauty, personified by the ivory-skinned, kewpie-faced, saucer-eyed, rainbow-colored-haired humanoids who populate the anime medium. In keeping with its post-colonialist agenda, *Imprint* reverses the Occidental aspiration of anime, and this film presents an exaggerated Orientalist world to parody the West's fetishistic delight in Japan's homogeneity and Japan's sensitivity about its own homogeneity. *Imprint* presents audiences with a nineteenth-century Japanese lower-class rural brothel in which the prostitutes — like characters out of anime — have rainbow-colored hair, talk in broken American-English, and dress in kimono-looking costumes which could have come straight off the catwalk of a Milan fashion show or the pages of a *Victoria's Secret* catalogue.[41]

Finally, the torture scene in *Imprint* is also distinguishable from other similar scenes by virtue of its polemical rendering of gender as a subjective narrative issue: a strategy that challenges the narrative premise of *Rashomon*. In *Rashomon*, Kurosawa uses the device of three men discussing a rape to heighten the impression of "objectivity:" three *women* talking about a rape, one presumes, would not work so well as a trope of objectivity. In contrast, *Imprint* challenges *Rashomon*'s construction of "objectivity" as male by insisting on the complicity of its male protagonist. It is Christopher, the white male hero on his quest for "truth," who brings up the story: it is he who demands to hear the tale from Woman. And Christopher's obsessive search for the "truth" ensures not only that Komomo's torture is brought up, but also that the torture is lengthened and repeated. In other words, it is Christopher's male curiosity and obsession with "truth" which are directly responsible for producing *more* spectacles of female sufferings.

And like the syphilitic midget voyeuristically watching Komomo's torture with a cock (pun intended) perched high on his head, Showtime viewers become complicit in their act of watching Komomo's torture. Unlike in *Rashomon*, though, viewers do not enjoy the kind of discreet distancing provided by Kurosawa to safely watch the overture and aftermath of Masago's beautifully non-violent violation. Instead, viewers are placed by Miike right in the middle of Komomo's beautifully violent violation and made to squirm in the discomfort of their unrestricted voyeurism.

## *Rashomon*: multiple narratives and the fib-telling woman

As crucial as Komomo's torture is as a set piece of the film, the rest of *Imprint* is not just an overwrought patchwork to justify the existence of that set piece. Ultimately, *Imprint* is less about Komomo than it is about the interaction between Woman and Christopher. The positions of Christopher and Woman are striking in terms of the contrasting dichotomies they reveal: male and female; Caucasian and Asian; rich and poor; patron and servant; able and disabled; listener and speaker; named and nameless. Yet, despite her apparent disadvantage, Woman holds the upper hand over her patron in their psychological and ideological game of cat-and-mouse. For, besides holding the key to the "truth" about Komomo, Woman also makes Christopher listen to stories about herself. This means that Christopher must agree to follow Woman's lead if he wishes to reach the "truth" about Komomo.





*Imprint's* colorful coiffures and Western-style kimonos.



Spectator immunity: the Priest and the Woodcutter sit in disinterested judgment of Masago.



Spectator complicity: a syphilitic midget (played by Mame Yamada) ogle at Komomo.

To understand how *Imprint* replicates *Rashomon*'s narrative structure and uses this replication as a strategy to further its radical argument, it is necessary first to understand how Akutagawa's "In a Bamboo Grove" and Kurosawa's *Rashomon* depict its central woman, Masago. For a summary of the pivotal event in *Rashomon*, we may quote David Desser, who has described *Rashomon* as a cross between a "metaphysical mystery" and "classic detective story:"

"A bandit has tricked a Samurai, tied him up, and raped his wife. The Samurai's death followed soon after. The major points of contention are the woman's duplicity in the event following the rape and the manner in which the Samurai-husband met his death. The unsolved crime leans not toward who did it, but *how*" (*Samurai* 67).

This is an apt summary of *Rashomon* because it captures the way in which the film presents itself and the way in which the central event of the story is framed. Desser's summary has several noteworthy aspects. First, it identifies *Rashomon*'s presentation of itself as a tale with universal relevance: at once "metaphysical" and "classic[al]." Second, it describes the rape of the woman as one event within a sequence of events rather than as an issue in itself. Third, it explicitly mentions the woman's "duplicity," registering the film's insistence that she is no passive victim. Fourth, it stresses the importance of the samurai's death, indicating that this is the story's cardinal issue. Fifth, it identifies the film's intellectual and philosophical interest, which is not *who* or *what* or *why*, but *how*.

We should examine in more detail the four different accounts of the story in *Rashomon*. Account I is by Tajomaru, the Bandit. Tajomaru was sitting under a tree when a samurai and his wife walked past him. A puff of wind lifted the woman's veil, revealing her beauty, which made Tajomaru decide to rape her. He tricked the samurai by offering to take him to a place where some precious swords were buried. When the woman realized what had happened, she wielded her dagger to fight Tajomaru. But, in due course, she succumbed to him. Afterwards, Tajomaru turned to leave. The woman ran after him, begging him not to leave her. Tajomaru released the samurai, and the two men engaged in a heroic duel. Finally, Tajomaru delivered a fatal blow on the samurai. The frightened woman ran away.

Account II is by Masago, the samurai's Wife. The bandit raped her, and ran off laughing. Masago tearfully threw herself on her husband's chest. But in the next moment, she noticed his eyes, which were filled with cold hatred and contempt towards her. Heartbroken and bewildered, she ran to fetch her dagger, cut her husband loose, and offered him the dagger to kill her. When he continued to stare at her, she lunged at the dagger wildly, fainted, and woke up to find the dagger in her husband's chest.

Account III is by Takehiro, the dead Samurai, speaking through a spiritual medium. After the rape, Takehiro's wife was persuaded by the bandit to go with him. Before leaving, his wife pointed to Takehiro and passionately urged the bandit to kill Takehiro. Shocked by the woman's savagery, the bandit kicked her to the ground. As the men were deciding what to do with her, the woman ran for





A case of “they said, she said.”



The Commoner, the Woodcutter and the Priest deplore the frailty of women.



Tajomaru and Takehiro stand over the prostrate and weeping Masago.

her life. The bandit chased after her but failed to catch her. Takehiro cried and stabbed himself with his wife’s dagger. Before he lost consciousness, he felt someone remove the dagger from his chest.

Account IV is by the Woodcutter and is not found in Akutagawa’s short story. After the rape, the bandit asked the woman to go with him. She gave no answer, cut her husband loose, and waited for the men to fight for her. But the samurai retreated, saying he would not risk his life for a “shameless whore” (Richie, *Rashomon* 81). The bandit reconsidered, and turned to leave. The woman ran after the bandit, but he pushed her away. As the two men stood over the weeping woman, suddenly her weeping changed into hysterical laughter. She called both men cowards, and said only a real man deserves a woman’s love. The men were shamed into fighting. Their duel was tentative and incompetent. Finally, the bandit managed to defeat the samurai. The frightened woman ran away. The Woodcutter did not mention the dagger and was speechless when the Commoner accused him of stealing it from the samurai’s body.

A standard reading of *Rashomon* may go something like this: Human nature is inevitably subjective, and this subjectivity presents itself as an obstacle to the attempt to establish objective truth. Human beings are unwilling, maybe are even unable, to see their own faults, and they would always present events favoring themselves as the “truth.” Since truth-telling is inseparable from morality, this fallacy in human nature represents not only an intellectual but also a moral problem for mankind. The overarching symbol, the ruined Rashomon Gate, symbolizes this intellectual and moral crisis. If it is possible for human beings to redeem themselves, this redemption must come from the human capacity to be truthful and upright, and from the restoration of law, culture, and social order, for which Rashomon Gate once stood.

If a standard reading of *Rashomon* looks like this, what would a feminist reading of *Rashomon* look like? Anyone interested should read Orit Kamir’s essay “Judgment by Film: Socio-Legal Functions of *Rashomon*.”[42] Even though *Rashomon* presents “truth” and “morality” as inseparable, such a presentation not only simplifies the types of situations that are subject to morality, but it also overlooks the inappropriateness of applying moral assessment to subjects who lack the freedom and choice to act morally in the first place. In every account of the story, the men *do* have this freedom and choice. For Takehiro, acting morally would have meant not giving into the temptation to seek accidental fortune;[43] it would also have meant behaving in a more humane way towards his traumatized wife. For Tajomaru, the path to righteousness is even clearer: Tajomaru could have chosen not to sexually violate woman or to assault the samurai or to commit theft or to kill. These are genuine moral choices because the power lies squarely with the men to do or to not do: *don’t* covet your neighbor’s goods; *don’t* cast the first stone; *don’t* lie; *don’t* steal; *don’t* rape.

Yet, while *Rashomon* insists that Masago is at least as corrupt and culpable as Tajomaru and Takehiro, what *Rashomon* fails to do is to provide a convincing argument as to what Masago *could* have done to do “right.” That Masago was forced into sex with Tajomaru is established in *every* account of the story. As Tajomaru freely admits, Masago “fought like a cat” (Richie, *Rashomon* 53), even though her show of “spirit” only makes him want to conquer her all the more. If



The camera completes Masago's humiliation by filming her through Tajomaru's legs.

the trial in progress is one in which Tajomaru supposedly stands accused, however, *Rashomon*'s way of presenting the rape narrative is such that the person being subject to trial and discreditation is actually the raped woman, Masago.

As Orit Kamir observes, even though Tajomaru is the accused, *Rashomon* places him in a prosecutorial role by giving him the first, longest, and most detailed case to present. Played by Toshiro Mifune as an impressive noble savage, Tajomaru only recognizes killing as a crime, and he blames the woman for leading him to kill. Tajomaru considers rape to be natural, even honorable, and the single depiction of the rape in the film — against a lush backdrop of rocks, water, grass, bamboos and circling sunlight — would tend to support his view. In the course of the film, we are told about various aspects of rape:

- that rape brings shame on a woman;
- that rape is a crime against the husband's honor;
- that rape makes a husband hate his wife;
- that rape is an expression of the rapist's love;
- that rape is enjoyable to a woman;
- that rape makes a woman look beautiful;
- that rape brings out the liar and inner whore in a woman;
- that rape is the catalyst for a man's death;
- that rape is an interesting topic of conversation for three idle men on a rainy day.

However, the impact of rape on the victim — the trauma resulting from her physical, psychological and emotional violation — is not an issue with which *Rashomon* concerns itself. Within the film's terms of reference, rape is primarily an issue about female dishonor and female dishonor's effect on male honor. Moreover, *Rashomon*'s restriction of the woman's voice to the lone voice of Masago ensures that men can collectively judge a woman, whereas a woman can only defend herself against male judgment. It also creates a paradigm in which each man acts as an individual, whereas one woman becomes representative of her entire sex.



Aspects of a woman: in version 1 of the story, Masago is soiled goods and a whore.

By depersonalizing the woman's experience of rape, and subordinating her experience to a "universal," "objective" inquiry about the effects of nature and culture's law on "human nature," *Rashomon* enforces a double-bind on the woman. On the one hand, it is naturally sanctioned for men to want to have sex with women; on the other, it is culturally sanctioned for men to condemn women for being sexually dishonored. Trapped within an ethical paradigm which both justifies male violence and sanctifies male judgment, Masago cannot win. If she cannot escape Tajomaru's "natural" determination to rape her, equally, she cannot escape the "cultural" consequences of the rape.

Among the several scenarios mentioned in the story, every scenario puts Masago at some sort of disadvantage. Whatever follows the rape, according to the code of honor of her society, Masago is a soiled commodity.[44] Therefore, the power lies with Takehiro or Tajomaru to claim her or to reject her; Masago is essentially bound to these men. Doing *nothing* will not undo her violation,



In version 2 of the story, she is soiled goods *and* a weakling.



In version 4 of the story, she is soiled goods, a whore *and* a shrew.



In version 3 of the story, she is a whore, shrew, liar, traitor, soiled goods *and* instigator of murder.

and doing *something* will only deepen her incrimination. To be sure, when every course of action would attract a negative judgment, action may well be an afterthought instead of a basis for judgment.

Let me explain this last concept in greater depth: If Masago shows a sexual response to her rapist and begs him to redeem her (Account I), she is soiled goods *and* a whore. If Masago fails to act and only weeps and faints (Account II), she is soiled goods *and* a weakling. If Masago goads her men to a duel (Account IV), she is soiled goods, a whore *and* a shrew. The most incriminating account (Account III) invites audiences to see Masago as *more* corrupt than the men. That account shows Masago instructing Tajomaru to kill her husband (or held back by Akutagawa in the original tale to be exposed climactically as *the* mother of all evils). Here is a woman who combines whore, shrew, liar, traitor, soiled goods *and* instigator of murder in one cunning body! Since “In a Bamboo Grove” is a story which depicts the consequences when “human nature” deviates from patriarchal morality, it is easy to see why the story should present a wife driven by lust to instigate the murder of her master/husband as the mother of all evils. This is because this act transgresses two of the fundamental laws of patriarchal moral order: female chastity and female submission.

What neither “In a Bamboo Grove” nor *Rashomon* adequately explores, though, is whether any of the above scenarios provides Masago with a legitimate choice. Being hounded into a corner and forced to fight to survive is not the same as having the free will to make a genuine moral choice. Even if Account III were true and Masago did try to instigate the murder of her husband, it remains questionable what Masago has to gain from running away with Tajomaru. “[T]ake me anywhere you like” (Akutagawa 18), she tells Tajomaru. But how does letting a violent trickster, thief, rapist and possible murderer take her “anywhere he likes” constitute a “choice” for a woman? The narrative’s insistence that this particularly lurid view of Masago’s culpability be the last thing we remember distracts us from the reality that, whichever path she takes, Masago can only make the situation *worse* for herself. All this brings home the “truth” that, as a raped woman, there was never any “right” path for Masago *except* to commit suicide, which is what she acknowledges in her own account:

“I threw myself into [a pond]. I tried to kill myself. But, I failed. What could a poor helpless woman like me do?” (Richie, *Rashomon* 68)

If, for men, moral action entails their consciously refraining from breaching established moral codes such as *don’t* greed; *don’t* lie; *don’t* steal; *don’t* lust, then, for a sexually violated woman, moral action would appear to entail an additional moral code: *don’t* live. By showing Masago frame a lame excuse for failing to do what she could have done quite easily, Akutagawa’s and Kurosawa’s male narratives would seem to have settled on one thing about this woman: namely, that she is to blame for lacking the integrity and courage to kill herself after being raped.

If the only decent thing a woman can do after being raped is to kill herself, it follows that a woman who has the presumption to survive rape must have something indecent about her. It follows, too, that a woman who has the audacity to publish her shame by testifying in an open hearing must have something suspicious, unclean, even shameless about her. Knowing what havoc the tongue of a shameless woman can cause, Tajomaru expresses misgiving about the foolishness of letting Masago escape alive:

“Now I’ll have to worry about her talking” (Richie, *Rashomon* 76)





This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## *Imprint*: multiple narratives and the truth-telling woman



"Whores never tell the truth, do we?"

It is precisely in articulating another version of how *Rashomon* enshrines a dichotomy between male judgment and female guilt, however, that *Imprint* takes issue with *Rashomon*. Sidestepping *Rashomon*'s elaborate process of exposing its central woman as a whore, *Imprint* takes as its premise the idea that its central woman is a whore. After establishing this premise, however, *Imprint* then allows its whore to do all the talking, which in turn graphically exposes the conditions that have caused her to become a whore in the first place. The effect is to challenge *Rashomon*'s view that a woman is responsible for her own whoredom merely by failing to kill herself, and to destabilize the "objective" assumption that men have the right to pass judgment on women.[45a] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] If *Rashomon* seeks to examine what happens when patriarchal morality is corrupted by "human beings," *Imprint* turns this premise inside out and presents an indictment of the corruption of patriarchal morality itself.



Pillar of civilization: the sign reads "Rashomon."

*Imprint*'s radical revision begins with the central symbol, Rashomon Gate, which underpins Kurosawa's film. *Imprint* transposes the time of the story from the late Heian period to the early-mid Meiji period (Akutagawa and Kurosawa were born in 1892 and 1910 respectively). Miike relocates the setting of the story from the dilapidated Rashomon Gate, offered by Akutagawa as a symbol of men's moral deterioration, to a seedy island-bound brothel, offered by Iwai as a symbol of a reality from which women have no escape. It hardly makes any difference by what name we call these women — harlots, whores, comfort women, sex slaves — it is obvious that the only choice for them, as evident from the pregnant corpses floating on the putrid pond at the start of the film, is to stay in the brothel or to drown in the pond. All in all, the fate of these women grimly fulfils *Rashomon*'s instruction that any sexually violated woman who doesn't want to be called a whore must kill herself immediately.



Lamp post to a whorehouse: the sign reads "Nishinaka shima" (literally "West-mid island").

In *Rashomon*, Kurosawa offers his art as an "objective" platform upon which we can ponder and observe the subjectivity of human actions. The characters' direct-to-camera testimonies have the effect of transforming audiences into fair-minded members of a jury. By positioning audiences this way, *Rashomon* implicitly enshrines its representation of truth-seeking and law-making as the audiences' own vocation and responsibility. "Truth" and "justice," the film invites audiences to concur, may be difficult and imperfect. But the philosophical and judicial systems which combine to discredit Masago remain unchallenged as legitimate systems for philosophers and law-makers to go about establishing objectivity, rationality and neutrality. If there is a moral lesson to come out of *Rashomon*, the lesson is most probably this. Human beings are inevitably duplicitous and self-serving, but if only they would develop the courage and decency to admit the "truth" about themselves, the world would be a better place.

In *Imprint*, however, Miike casts into doubt not just the attainability of "truth" or the subjectivity of "human beings." Rather, it is the presupposition underlying the philosopher's own quest for "truth." As Woman observes on



Death by water: the pond in which Masago fails to drown herself.



Bodies of dead pregnant women floating on a pond.



Narrative I — Melodrama: Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. The woman's outstretched hand appeals for the viewer's pity.

hearing Christopher's claim that what he wants is the truth:

"I wonder why people always want to know the truth. Sometimes it's better not to know. Sometimes the lie is better" (Tengan 21).

If a woman had said this in *Rashomon*, the explanation most consistent with that film's philosophy probably would be that women are too weak and corrupt to handle the "truth." But, in *Imprint*, this remark is made by a world-weary Woman who has obviously learnt the hard way that the quest for "truth" is never as innocuous as the truth-seekers themselves assume.

Imitating *Rashomon*'s narrative technique, *Imprint* offers multiple versions of an unsolved crime concerning a theft, a sexual assault and a suspicious death. Woman herself anticipates Christopher's suspicion of her duplicity by asking him sarcastically:

"Whores never tell the truth, do we?" (Tengan 21).

In appearance, then, *Imprint*'s narrative multiplicity upholds the conventional wisdom that truth-telling is antithetical to female nature, particularly to the nature of a sexually impure female. But, unlike the voice of Masago, *Imprint* does not construct the voice of Woman as "objectively" unreliable as mediated through a male-dominated court, two male participants, three male bystanders, and three male master-philosophers. In *Imprint*, Woman does all the talking, and the three accounts she offers combine to destabilize traditional male-centered views of the world:

Account I: "Madame Butterfly" — woman recounts a sanitized version of her childhood

- Woman came from a poor but happy family.
- Mother was a midwife. Father had chronic tuberculosis.
- Woman was born with a birth defect on her face. Only the local Buddhist Priest showed her kindness.
- Father committed suicide to relieve the burden on his family.
- Mother had no means to support Woman, and sent Woman out into the world to find a better life.
- Woman ended up in a whorehouse.
- Woman was bullied by the other prostitutes. Only Komomo showed her kindness.
- One day, Madam found her valuable jade ring missing. A hairpin was found in Madam's room.
- Out of malice and jealousy, the prostitutes framed Komomo for the theft.
- Komomo was tortured by Madam's underlings.
- Komomo hanged herself shortly after being tortured.

Account II: "Woman Beware Woman" — woman gives an alternative version of the story about the missing jade ring

- Woman saw Madam put away the ring in a chest of drawers.
- Woman snuck into Madam's room, and stole the ring.
- Woman ran into Komomo in the hallway.
- Later, Woman presented Komomo's hairpin to Madam, and claimed to have found it while cleaning Madam's room.
- Madam's underlings took Komomo away to torture.
- Woman herself strangled Komomo shortly after the torture.

Account III: "Woman as Monster" — woman recounts the "true" story of her





**Narrative II — Sexploitation:** Norifumi Suzuki's *Terrifying Girls' High School: Lynch Law Classroom*. The woman's outstretched hand exposes her bare breasts to the viewer.



**Narrative III — Horror:** Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-on 2*. The woman's outstretched hand menaces the viewer.

childhood

- Woman's parents were siblings and beggars.
- Woman was the product of her parents' incestuous union.
- Father was a drunk, rapist, and wife-beater.
- Mother was an abortionist.
- Woman was bullied by the local children.
- The Buddhist Priest was a pedophile who sexually abused Woman.
- Father raped Woman.
- Father was killed by someone.
- Woman reveals that she has a conjoined twin Sister living inside her head.
- Woman reveals that it is Sister who killed Father and who took Madam's ring.
- But it is Woman herself who decided to kill Komomo.

In *Rashomon*, the multiple narratives have a purported function of exposing the blind spots inherent in human nature. Nominally, each narrator has an equal say in the story, and the fact that each narrator should offer an account favoring themselves is used to demonstrate the subjective egoism of human nature. As previously argued, however, the trope of equality and neutrality in *Rashomon* functions merely as a smokescreen, since the literary, philosophical and legal conventions that *Rashomon* invokes and presents as neutral operate in unison to discredit and incriminate the central woman, Masago. As Orit Kamir argues:

"The acts of judging the woman and silencing her story constitute the men on-screen as a judging, masculine community .... [B]y neutralizing the men's gender the film prevents the viewer from suspecting that the judging community is masculine and that masculine screening norms may be silencing the woman's story, thereby luring the viewer to join the masculine community on-screen." ("Judgment" 84)

Targeting this objectified bias in *Rashomon*, *Imprint* appropriates *Rashomon*'s narrative structure in order to expose the blind spots inherent in the patriarchal conception of "human nature." The way *Imprint* achieves this is by having Woman knowingly adopt the traditional structures (or "imprints") of various standard male narratives in the three versions of the story she tells.

The first version is a melodrama in the tradition of *Madame Butterfly* or *Memoirs of a Geisha*. It is a tragic-idyllic narrative about the misfortune of women, in the course of which female suffering is presented as a sumptuous spectacle for male enjoyment.[45] The second version is a cautionary tale about the corruption of women, presented in the tradition of respectable erotic films such as Seijun Suzuki's *Gates of Flesh* (1964) or *pinku eiga* such as Norifumi Suzuki's *Terrifying Girls' High School: Lynch Law Classroom* (1973). It shows the betrayal of a good woman by a gang of bad women and empowers male audiences to sexualize and condemn women at the same time: "How can you live with yourself?" Christopher denounces Woman:

"For some trinket you wanted, you killed *my* Komomo" (Tengan 25-26).[46]

The third version is a horror fantasy in the *kaidan* tradition of Japanese folklore, which recent films such as Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998) and Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-on* (2000) have so cleverly modernized for their adolescent male demographics. It offers a grimly realistic portrait of violence, abuse and revenge, ending with the obligatory appearance of a terrifying she-monster who



All strung up – womanhood in three phases: Childbirth ...



... Prostitution ...



... and Abortion.

represents a cathartic expression (or, if the monster is destroyed, a symbolic exorcism) of the male fear of women.[47]

By having Woman self-consciously present these narratives as versions of the “truth” which the male hero is seeking, *Imprint* explicitly presents “truth” as a male narrative construct. The three narratives destabilizes the “objectivity” of the inquest which *Rashomon* uses to incriminate Masago. Beyond their function as narrative references, however, there is a subtle interconnectedness between the three versions of the story. The focus and timing of Woman’s successive revelations — moving from male fantasy, to male judgment, to male nightmare — combine to destabilize the methodology of the epistemological quest in *Rashomon*. If David Desser is correct to argue that *Rashomon*’s interest “leans not toward who did it, but *how*” (*Samurai* 67), what *Imprint* does is to expose the inadequacy of asking *how*, and to reinstate the need to ask *why*: why did Komomo die?[48] Once *why* becomes a relevant question, the objective quest for “truth,” which *Rashomon* presents as noble and essential for mankind’s salvation, is no longer as relevant, important or universally applicable as it appears. Nor does the status of truth-telling as a moral duty appear as absolute as it appears in *Rashomon*.

To illustrate, we need look no further than the counter moral lesson taught by the story of Komomo, who has “a heart of gold” (Tengan 16) and who always tells the “truth.” Komomo declares, with the frankest naivety, that she would have been born a “princess” in another age, and has a man who “loves me” and promises to “take me away from here” (Tengan 18).[49] Nevertheless, telling the “truth” most certainly has done Komomo more harm than good by instigating the malice and jealousy of the other prostitutes. More relevantly, to seek “truth” for the sole purpose of satisfying Christopher’s personal obsession with Komomo is to narrow the terms of reference of the inquest. For how would satisfying Christopher’s personal obsession redeem the plight of women (to quote Iwai again) “with no place to escape”?

Seeking “truth” on Christopher’s terms, in other words, is to focus on the symptom and ignore the cause. To address the cause, it is necessary to recast the question and widen the terms of the inquiry. We must go right to the root of the problem, and ask: *Why* do women become prostitutes? *Why* do women get raped? *Why* do women seek abortion? *Why* do women get bashed at home? *Why* do beautiful women get exploited for their beauty? *Why* do ugly women get persecuted for their ugliness? *Rashomon* is interested in none of these questions, and the film’s portrayal of Masago does away with the need to ask any of these questions by offering a moral generalization:

“Sin happens because human nature is egotistical, deceitful and corrupt.”

Yet, *Imprint* challenges audiences into confronting the phallogentric implications behind such moral generalizations. When Christopher’s obsession with *how* one particular woman died is contrasted with the urgency and reality of the questions regarding *why* all women suffer, Christopher’s quest quickly reveals itself to be a meretricious, self-indulgent exercise. Indeed, even if Christopher were to get the “truth” he wanted, and the prostitutes who tortured Komomo were brought to trial in a judicial court resembling the one being held in *Rashomon*, this would hardly change the fact that the world remains a very ugly place. This is because the plague of suffering spreads far beyond the confines of one whorehouse. Surely, a more fundamental injustice is at play, and the source of injustice is pointedly identified by *Imprint* from a radical perspective: patriarchal oppression. *Imprint* renders explicit *Rashomon*’s implicit phallogentricism, which constructs a woman’s rape not as an event significant in itself but as an event significant only insofar as it provides a

context for rational, objective male philosophers to rationally and objectively philosophize about “truth,” “justice” and “human nature.”

By the time the third version of the “truth” emerges, Komomo’s torture, which initially came across as the most horrific example of “human” cruelty, falls into perspective. A particular form of fetishistic, stylized female suffering gives way to a more general, prosaic form of female suffering. The narrative movement is such that, instead of supporting the wishful thinking of men like Christopher that the origin of “evil” is traceable to a few ugly bad women behaving nastily towards one beautiful virtuous woman, the “truth” turns out to be an indictment of the entire social structure that oppresses *all* women. Komomo’s suffering is merely one isolated imprint on a larger canvas of existential female sufferings. Reversing *Rashomon*’s universalist argument about the sins of the “universal female,” *Imprint* posits a counter universalist argument about the sins of the “universal male.”



### “Mother,” impregnation, procreation

The first two versions of the story, as mentioned, are told by Woman to satisfy Christopher’s personal obsession with his Komomo. By the time Woman reaches the third and final version, however, Woman goes into much greater details about the true story of her own “Mother” (*Haha*). The fact that Mother, like Woman, is nameless indicates that Mother is also an archetype of her sex. And the story of Mother serves to remind us that there are indeed other narratives — other “truths” — worth telling and knowing besides Komomo’s story.[50]

As a pleasure-seeking man, Christopher is not expected to care a lot about Mother’s plight. Unlike his beautiful Komomo, Mother is old, shabby and ugly, and therefore would never have qualified as an object of a male erotic fetish. Regardless of this, Mother’s sufferings are real enough, and the film creates counterpoints between the erotic image of Komomo being tortured, and prosaic images of women giving birth and undergoing abortions; that juxtaposition brings home the “truth” that these experiences are all common to women. The life of Mother follows a pattern — an “imprint,” if you will — that is only too predictable.[51]

Mother is born into a poor rural family, is raped by her Brother, and runs off to live with him in a riverside hovel. “Despite his cruelty and drinking,” Woman recalls, “momma did her duties as a good wife” (Tengan 29). Mother is kicked and punched by her Brother-Husband for having no money to buy him *sake*. And Brother-Husband is played by Houka Kinoshita as an uncouth, inarticulate idiot to parody the feral charisma of Toshiro Mifune’s Tajomaru,[52] in a scene that presents us not only with a savage reenactment of the chase scene in



The romantic pursuit ...

... of Masago by Tajomaru in



## Rashomon.

*Rashomon*,[53a] but also with a grimly realistic picture of what Masago's life would have looked like had she *really* run off with Tajomaru. Mother makes a living out of helping other sisters, mothers, daughters and wives terminate their unwanted pregnancies. Mother becomes pregnant herself, and gives birth to a baby girl, whom she initially abandons to die in the river. But when against all the odds the baby girl survives, Mother is overcome by her maternal instincts, and makes up her mind to bring up "Daughter."



The brutal bashing ...

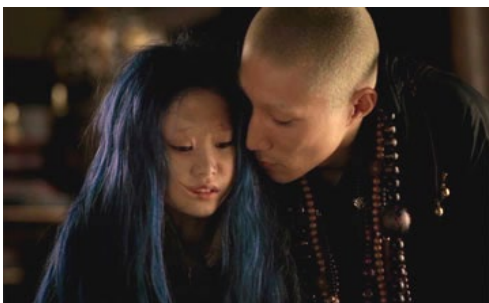


.... of Mother by Father in *Imprint*.



An emissary of "heaven" (*Rashomon's* priest).

The moment that Mother makes up her mind to bring up Daughter, however, is also the moment that Daughter inherits the sin of being female. Daughter spends her childhood helping Mother help other sisters, mothers, daughters and wives terminate their unwanted pregnancies.[53] Daughter grows up with a facial deformity and is branded a "freak" and "baby killer" (Tengan 32) by the neighborhood's male children, who, it is not hard to predict, will grow into another generation of violent men who impregnate another generation of pliant women in order that the whole cycle of violence and oppression could continue. Daughter is raped by Father and sexually abused by the local Priest, who promises to lead her to spiritual salvation. On reaching puberty, Daughter enters a whorehouse, using her body to serve the pleasure of men: "Tonight I am yours," she tells Christopher, "You may do what you wish with me" (Tengan 7). Finally, Daughter is asked by a rich white Daddy to recount her miseries in order that *his* "truth" could be told and *his* broken heart could be nursed.



An emissary of "hell" (*Imprint's* priest).

If the lives of Mother and Daughter combine into an extreme yet disturbingly lucid summary of the universal plight of women, their experiences also point up the final meaning of "imprint:" Procreation. In the infernal world in which these suffering women struggle for survival, procreation is exclusively the outcome of violence, betrayal, manipulation, incest, rape, pedophilia and prostitution to which men subject women. Since procreative sex is responsible for producing life, and life for women can only mean abuse and exploitation by men, procreative sex which produces life must be a sin, and death cannot be worse than life when life *already* resembles the darkest pits of "hell." [54]

Following this reasoning, Woman reaches her own rationale as to why she had to kill Komomo. Strangling Komomo seems like an ultimate act of kindness because death would save Komomo from having to continue her hellish existence as a soiled object of male exploitation.[55] Komomo might go to "heaven" if she dies rather than carries on living among the fallen women who are doomed to spend the rest of their lives using their bodies to serve callous, exploitative men. Accordingly, Woman explains to the morally outraged Christopher what drove a passive woman like her to "take action" for the first time in her life:

"You don't understand: I helped [Komomo] to get to heaven .... I made myself hate her .... Supposed I like her. What would the devil think of her having such an evil friend! He'd think if they are friends, then Komomo must be a wicked person, too. He would have sent her



Woman and her Sister.



A demonically active woman's hand ...



... inside a demonically active woman's brain.



From woman to demon —

to hell! So I hated Komomo. And now I'm sure she's in heaven. What could be more pitiful? To be strangled to death by the one you trusted the most. I'm sure Buddha grabbed her by the hand and took her to heaven" (Tengan 26-27).

If Woman's rationale sounds "demented" to Christopher (an early Wikipedia entry on the film sympathetically noted that Christopher "barely keep[s] his sanity after hearing this demented tale"), this is so because patriarchal morality and theology are too convoluted to accommodate a woman's reality. How does a sexually exploited woman reconcile the moral code that "good" women are subservient to men and the theological code that only the "good" women deserve to go to heaven? As a philosophy of salvation, Woman's explanation is a twisted parody of the traditional logic which Akutagawa's young man uses to trump the hair-stealing crone in the tale "Rashomon,"[56] and a twisted parody of the traditional concept of "heaven" which Kurosawa's Priest accuses "human beings" of dishonoring in the film *Rashomon*. Kurosawa's Priest says:

"[I]f men don't tell the truth, do not trust one another, then the earth becomes a kind of hell" (Richie, *Rashomon* 86).

"Truth" and "trust," we can work out by logical inference, set "men" on "earth" on the correct path to "heaven."

However, Woman learns from *her* Priest, who uses catechisms on "heaven" and "hell" to reach her body — "If you don't do as I say," the Priest warns her, "you'll go straight to hell" (Tengan 32). She learns that so long as a woman is subject to the physical control and cultural authority of "men," it matters not if she is passive or active, innocent or guilty, trusting or treacherous, truthful or untruthful, she is doomed to go to hell anyway:

"And so this hole leads to hell too" (Tengan 32).[57]

If this interpretation is correct, then an alternative "truth" emerges from this bastardized sister narrative to *Rashomon*. Contrary to what Christopher and his fellow "men" like to believe, hell on earth did not begin when several ugly nasty whores decide to gang up and bully one beautiful innocent woman. Rather, hell for women begins from the moment that women are born into a world ruled by men, who are themselves born of women, yet who also control and condemn women when they grow into men. As Woman summarizes this grotesque "universal" law:

"Men don't like our holes. They yearn for the hell behind them. The hell they were in before being born" (Tengan 22).[58]

## "Woman," "sister," monster

The climax of the story coincides with the appearance of Woman's twin "Sister" (Ane). Notably, this is the first time that an explicit supernatural element appears in the film. Until now, the narrative has suspended the very element that audiences expect from a traditional ghost story. The film kept viewers in the dark as to whether Woman was speaking literally or figuratively when she claimed that "demons and whores are the only ones living here" (Tengan 10). "It was and wasn't Hell" ("Imprinting" 2:48) is how Iwai describes the setting of "Bokkee." But with the film's climactic twist steering the story back onto its



expected course as a tale of supernatural horror — a trope taken straight out of “Bokke” — *Imprint* forces us to ponder the priority of the things that “really scare” us. If the reality of female suffering is already so horrifying, what else in the supernatural world could horrify us? Do rape, abortion and domestic violence become interesting to men only when these horrors have been sexualized into porn or sensationalized into supernatural thrillers?

The reference to “demons” is most probably a reference to a comment by the Commoner just before the Woodcutter offers his final account in *Rashomon*:

“Stories like this are ordinary enough now. I heard that demons used to live in the castle here by the gate, but they all ran away, because what men do now horrified them so” (Richie, *Rashomon* 78).

While *Imprint* would agree that “what men do” is horrible, *Imprint* invites audiences to become horrified by a rather different view of “what men do.” In *Imprint*, the “demon” turns out to be a deformed Siamese twin-sister of Woman living inside the brain of Woman. Symbolically, we may interpret “Sister,” whose right hand doubles as her face and her body, as a wry self-portrait of Shimako Iwai as a young female writer writing against the masculinist literary tradition set down by Japan’s “Father” of the short story, Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Female imagination, female knowledge, and female ability to counter-reason threaten the authority of powerful men; such female traits are dangerous and monstrous and must be branded demonic.

The film uses Sister’s monstrosity in other ways to advance its radical polemic. On the one hand, Sister’s monstrosity aptly manifests itself as the monstrosity of a malformed fetus. This is because women alone must bear the consequence of sex (whether childbirth or abortion), even though men are directly responsible for impregnating women (whether through seduction or rape). On the other hand, Sister’s monstrosity aptly manifests itself in her aggressive femaleness (she has teeth in her mouth resembling a *vagina dentata*) and in her aggressive maleness (she speaks with a masculine voice, and has a tongue resembling a phallus). This is because androgyny and hermaphroditism defy traditional gender roles, making it possible for women to transcend their biological destiny as slaves of procreation.[59]

The strongest reason for Sister’s monstrosity, however, is her emphatic refusal to be a good little girl for men. Sister is active rather than passive; supernatural rather than cultural/natural; amoral rather than morally subservient. And, as Woman explains, Sister always gets what she “want[s]” (Tengan 37). In sum, Sister is a complete embodiment of Barbara Creed’s monstrous-feminine. She is at once a Freudian phallic mother, a Kristevan abject woman, a vampire, a ghoul, a witch, a psychopath, a possessed body, an animalistic human, a bleeding womb, a girl-boy and a *femme castratrice* (Creed 1). As a lawless she-monster, Sister wrecks havoc on the moral, judicial and cultural order maintained by the laws of the father. It is Sister who killed Father; it is Sister who stole Madam’s ring, and it is Sister who forces Woman to tell the real “truth” about Woman’s family history and how Komomo died. More important than *how* Komomo died, however, is *why* Komomo died. And the final truth, suppressed in *Rashomon*’s “objective” narrative about human subjectivity, is exposed by Sister in *Imprint*. What killed Komomo is “men” and the institution of patriarchy, which subordinates women, domesticates women, persecutes women, prostitutes women, all the while restricting access to “truth” and “justice” to men!

To emphasize this point, Sister goes on to expose a dark secret about our Occidental knight-errant. In *Rashomon*, Masago taunts and laughs at her men in the final account of the story.[60] In *Imprint*, Sister also taunts and laughs at



Masago's tears change into laughter ...



... as she rises to challenge Tajomaru and Takehiro.



From woman to demon —





Woman raises her head ...

the truth-seeking Christopher as she rattles out the skeletons he is hiding in his closet. Early in the film, Christopher claimed that he fell in love with Komomo because “she reminded me of my little sister” (Tengan 10). But the real “truth,” finally exposed by Sister’s demonic clairvoyance, is that Christopher raped and killed his own little sister back in the United States. Tellingly, the question that the spirit of Christopher’s little sister wants answered is not *how* but *why*:

"You are hurting me. Stop it, Christopher! Why did you kill me? Why would you hurt me? Your own little sister? I did what you asked. Why?" (Tengan 38)



... to reveal Sister to Christopher.

As a helpless little girl spirit, Christopher’s sister offers an alternative personification of victimhood to *Rashomon*’s aggressively self-righteous man spirit, Takehiro. Moreover, it is interesting that Christopher’s little sister should appear in flashback as a blue-eyed little Japanese girl. We may interpret this as a satirical nod to Arthur Golden’s improbable Euro-Asian geisha girl, Sayuri, who is yet another specimen in a long line of docile Asian females — Madame Butterfly, Suzie Wong, Miss Saigon. Such characters are created to be the fetishistic objects of fantasy for oversexed white men.[61] Christopher, as representative of “men” who exploit women and representative of “Westerners” who exploit Easterners, is incriminated on both counts in Woman’s alternative “Rashomon.”

When Christopher is brought face to face with the “truth,” his response, tellingly, is to deny it and resort to physical violence. Christopher must destroy the disfigured woman who has exposed the offensive “truth” to him. It is entirely appropriate for Christopher that, at this juncture, Woman’s identity should converge with the identity of her monstrous Sister: this convergence provides him with the perfect justification to kill them both. In his agitation, Christopher produces a gun — an unambiguous phallic symbol[62]. He aims it at the monster in his endeavor to restore the normative pattern in which he functions as the male hero slaying a terrifying she-monster on his heroic male quest for “truth.” Christopher yells before firing his gun twice at Woman/Sister — one bullet into their heart and one bullet into their brain:

“I’ll give you what you want. I’m going to send you both to hell!” (Tengan 38).

Yet, the final “truth” that comes out is something that Christopher did not anticipate. The monster changes shape again, and reveals itself to be Komomo, who, with her brains blown out by Christopher’s gun, stretches out her arm and plaintively tells him, “I waited for you,” before collapsing at his feet.[63] This ultimate act of female self-immolation mirrors the moment in *Rashomon* in which Masago throws herself at Tajomaru’s feet in order to trick him into helping her cover up her disgrace. In *Rashomon*, Masago is presented as a lustful, deceitful, treacherous “universal woman” for the audiences’ judgment. But in *Imprint*, a radical counter-lesson is presented to expose the fallacy of *Rashomon*’s moral lesson. It matters not that a woman is as kind, virtuous, gentle, chaste, innocent, truthful, loyal and spiritually pure as Komomo. So long as “men” are in control of this woman, they can still find a way to make a whore of her, condemn her sins, and send her to hell.[64] The imprint of this “truth” was evident all along but awaiting disclosure in this evil twin-sister version of *Rashomon*. Christopher’s quest for “truth” has led to his own incrimination by



Not quite Sayuri —



Christopher's murdered sister as a blue-eyed little Japanese girl

Woman and Sister. He was the rapist and killer of his own little sister, and he is the traitor and killer of his beloved Komomo!



"Don't leave me," Masago beseeches her rapist Tajomaru.



"I waited for you," Komomo wails to her killer Christopher.

[Go to page 6](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Prisoner, persecutor, prosecutor — the defiantly unrepentant captive Tajomaru ...



... and a shackled Christopher sitting inside a rain-soaked prison cell.



Imprints of Kurosawa: a male woodcutter and a male priest cradling a healthy baby boy.

### A lasting “imprint”

After the monster is destroyed, the final scene of *Imprint* shows Christopher sitting on the floor behind the bars of a rain-drenched prison cell. In symbolic terms, this ending reverses the clearing of the rain and the restoration of the men’s freedom of movement at the end of *Rashomon*. But even though the incarceration of Christopher suggests that some sort of “justice” has been served, one question remains. Is Christopher locked up for taking a precious human life, or is he locked up for spoiling a lucrative commodity of the brothel? Whatever the answer, it is obvious that the distinction between prosecution and persecution means little in this infernal world, since the prison guards openly joke among themselves that they will “have some fun” with Christopher for killing “that whore” (Tengan 39). Prison is an appropriate motif on which to conclude *Imprint*, given that the elusiveness of justice is also one of *Rashomon*’s central concerns.[65][[open endnotes in new window](#)] However, it shouldn’t take long for audiences to realize what drastically different perspectives *Rashomon* and *Imprint* offer on the efficacy of “justice.”

After telling a tale of human corruption and fallacy in *Rashomon*, Kurosawa famously takes it upon himself to soften the cynicism of Akutagawa’s original story — in which the only redemption comes from the stoicism of the Samurai’s suicide in the wake of his wife’s sinfulness. The director adds an optimistic humanist coda. In Kurosawa’s version of *Rashomon*, the Priest, Woodcutter and Commoner discover a crying baby in a remote corner of Rashomon Gate. Unconscionably, the Commoner strips the baby of its swaddling and runs off with them. But the Woodcutter takes pity on the baby and resolves to take it home and raise it among his own children. The Priest is moved by this spontaneous act of kindness and apologizes to the Woodcutter for misjudging him:

“I’m grateful to you .... [T]hanks to you, I think I will be able to keep my faith in men” (Richie, *Rashomon* 91).

In short, faith in universal humanity is salvaged by the salvation of an innocent child.

For all the talk about universal humanity, however, one crucial detail may strike many viewers as too natural to even require exposition: the baby is most emphatically a *male*.[66] However, in a story about the rape of a woman, this normative coda harbors a troubling connotation which Kurosawa may or may not have intended: namely, that heterosexual sex, *irrespective of female consent*, is a positive, life-affirming act on the grounds that heterosexual sex is the means by which “mankind” renews the cycle of life. Through the baby boy, [67] *Rashomon*’s Priest discovers a renewed faith in life despite knowing that “mankind” will inevitably go on distorting “truth” and “justice” to save its own skin.

In contrast, *Imprint* offers a savage parody of *Rashomon*’s comforting humanist coda. Instead of a healthy baby boy representing our universal humanity, Christopher finds in his water bowl an aborted fetus: possibly an unwanted *female* fetus.[68] And the grotesque image of Christopher’s blow-kissing and





Imprints of Miike: a dead little girl, a dead prostitute and an incarcerated *gaijin* cradling a bowl of aborted fetus.



The Woodcutter and the baby boy.



The aborted fetus.

coddling the fetus, which parodies the beatific expression on *Rashomon*'s Woodcutter's face as he makes his way home with the baby boy in his arms, is a reminder that, ultimately, the male is still in control of the female. A life that has been ripped out of a woman's womb is still just the plaything of a man. With this image imprinted in our mind, *Imprint* thus compels us to confront a question missing altogether from *Rashomon*'s terms of reference. What hope is there for "women" to expect justice in a world ruled by "men," who are more interested in aloof philosophies of justice than in shocking realities of injustice?

In keeping with the polemics of this savage parody, the final image is framed to look like a beautiful exotic *ukiyo-e*: a final "imprint." But imitating *Rashomon*'s tableau of a male priest and a male woodcutter cradling a healthy baby boy, *Imprint* offers an alternative tableau of a little girl, a prostitute and an incarcerated *gaijin* ("foreigner") cradling a bowl of aborted fetus. This blasphemous "imprint" visually summarizes the film's radical critique of *Rashomon*'s unspoken misogyny and U.S. audiences' complicity in condoning *Rashomon*'s misogyny. Finally, we can recapitulate the various meanings of the film's title:

- "imprint" is a metaphor for the fetishistic appropriation of Japan by the West;
- "imprint" is a metaphor for the phallogentric narrative traditions laid down by two masculinist masters of twentieth-century Japanese literature and cinema;
- "imprint" is also a metaphor for mankind's entrenched practices of exploiting womankind, who should have every reason to be "really scared" of the things that powerful men uphold to be "sacred." [69]

If U.S. audiences (for whatever reason) find watching *Imprint* a torturous experience, that too might be in keeping with the tenor and structure (another "imprint") of the film, which reverses the voyeuristic view of "pity on me" sadomasochism that some Westerners think is inherent in the soul of Japanese culture, and reveals the true villain to be the American who claims to be seeking "truth" and his lost love.

In an article exploring the rise and fall of J-horror, *Midnight Eye*'s co-founder Nicholas Rucka has endorsed a comment by Patrick Macias about Miike's most famous film *Audition*:

"In *Audition*'s final moments, Miike goes beyond the limits .... The fact is that for the last 90 minutes or so, we've gone and given away the keys to the car and made a filmmaker our god. And like a revelation of Gnostic proportions, the peeling back of truth hurts even as it sets you free." ("Death" par. 56)

After this quote, Rucka goes on to offer a personal anecdote. He recounts an incident in 2001 when he overheard a conversation between two passers-by in New York City. One of the passers-by turned to his friend when they saw a poster of *Audition* on the wall and said:

"That's the fucking *scariest movie* I've ever seen."

On hearing this remark, Rucka describes that he "smiled" and felt "oddly proud" ("Death" par. 58). Yet, if *Audition* made Rucka smile with pride, it is interesting that *Imprint* should have removed his smile. His review of *Imprint* concludes with the disparaging criticism that he would have preferred "better storytelling" ("Review" par. 13).

Yet, Rucka's criticism itself raises two questions: what is "storytelling," and what



The baby boy from *Dead or Alive 2: Birds* — No, the question, “Where are you going?” is *not* relevant to women with “no place to escape.”



Closing Imprints: *Rashomon* ends with the Chinese character *Shu* (“End”) written in classical calligraphy superimposed over an image of Rashomon Gate.



*Imprint* ends with the word “Imprint” written in Oriental font superimposed over a black-and-white background.

are the criteria for judging that one kind of storytelling is “better” than another? I suggest that the main reasons why Rucka didn’t “get” *Imprint* could be these. Not only is *Imprint*’s storytelling so deviously crafted as to frustrate and mislead conventional expectations about storytelling, but its satirical thrust also undermines the ideological premise on which Rucka develops his own critical practice. That practice operates under the premise that he is an ultra-cool Western connoisseur of old and new Japanese cinema, but unmistakably, a *male* connoisseur of *male* narratives by *male* storytellers about *male* Japan. However, *Imprint* has defied Rucka’s masculinist assumptions about storytelling and raised the stakes above *Audition*’s grotesque role-reversal fantasy (in which Cinderella changes into Dominatrix at the stroke of midnight[70] ) to offer a stinging polemical argument about female victimization from a woman’s perspective. And the butt of the joke includes the same Western male audiences who uphold Akira Kurosawa as the “Father,” “Emperor,” “Master” and “God” of world cinema.

To borrow another phrase from Rucka: if the “truth” in *Audition* hurts, then the “truth” in *Imprint* should hurt even more. This is because *Imprint* has pushed its radical argument beyond the comfort zone of Miike’s regular fans, who have championed Miike mostly because they think they could rely on this sunglasses-wearing, cool alpha-male dude from the East to take the piss out of priggish, prissy and politically correct people on their behalf.[71] To the extent that these viewers were expecting a politically incorrect film, *Imprint* has met their expectations and delivered political incorrectness in spades. Yet, the target of the film’s political incorrectness is also the chauvinism and egotism of heterosexual white men, the very demographic who could hitherto nominate without any irony or inconsistency Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* and Miike’s *Dead or Alive* trilogy as their all-time favorite films. After *Imprint*, the challenge for these fans is whether they are still prepared to call Miike “cool” for making a film that laughs at rather than with them.

*Imprint* ends with the word “Imprint” written in Oriental fonts superimposed over a black-and-white background. Jokingly or otherwise, the following disclaimer also appears at the end of *Imprint*’s credit: “The events, characters and firms depicted in this motion picture are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons living, or dead, or to actual firms is purely coincidental.”

Before I conclude, I want to draw attention to a scene that might have been overlooked even by the viewers who *didn’t* eject and discard their DVD of *Imprint* after the first twenty minutes. I am referring to the brief epilogue that occurs towards the end of the credits. This epilogue stands in contrast to *Rashomon*’s traditional ending, which pronounces that the narrative has reached an “End” and broaches no possibility for negotiation or revision. Here *Imprint*’s mysterious epilogue breaks with the temporal and spatial logic of the main narrative to surprise audiences with an unexpected final “imprint.” Even though the main narrative has suggested that Christopher has killed Woman, the epilogue shows that she is not only alive but also doing very well. Miike explains the origin of this mysterious epilogue:

“This time, it was supposed to be a scene with Kudoh-san, the lead .... We talked about what we should do. ‘What should she be doing?’ we discussed. I said maybe she’s grilling fish. She said, ‘Grilling a fish, that’s good.’ There’s no particular reason. She said it should be



The woman is raped, denounced and excommunicated in *Rashomon*.



The woman is objectified into a crazy penis-worshipper in *In the Realm of the Senses*.



One-eyed fish = one-eyed monster?

rockfish. It's a fish with scary eyes. She happily grills this. These are things she likes not depicted in the movie. She doesn't get to eat too often. So she got her hands on rockfish which she likes. So she has an expression not seen in the movie. I tried it and it was a mysterious scene." ("Imprinting" 36.51-38.02)

Apart from revealing the flexibility of Miike's method and his congeniality with his lead actress,[72] this excerpt can also be used to advance my above reading of *Imprint*. For why should the fish be one-eyed? I have two proposals. On the one hand, the one-eyed fish could suggest a limited vision and an inability to see what one doesn't want to see. On the other hand, the one-eyed fish could be a visual pun on the slang term for the phallus: *one-eyed monster*. That the final image of *Imprint* should present a woman happily and confidently grilling a one-eyed monster indicates how the film differs from the other texts espoused by Western audiences as the greatest "masterpieces" of Japanese cinema: whether that masterpiece be *Rashomon*, in which a woman is raped, denounced and excommunicated, or *In the Realm of the Senses*, in which a woman is objectified into a crazy penis-worshipper wandering the streets of Tokyo with a severed penis in her hand and an ecstatic expression on her face.

In contrast to the endings of Kurosawa's and Oshima's phallogentric narratives, *Imprint* ends with the imprint of a woman doing something she likes rather than doing something to look bad, mad, sad or sexy for men. And the sole purpose of the epilogue, according to Miike, is to capture the expression on Woman's face as she relishes the pleasure of doing what she likes: a state of mind which he doesn't pretend to understand, but which he is satisfied simply to let her express. All in all, I suggest that the epilogue of *Imprint* reveals a level of respect for female desire which horror films by male directors rarely demonstrate, and which serves an important reminder to Western fans of Japanese media that apart from stories about ninjas, samurais, yakuza, nymphomaniacs and tentacle monsters, Japan has a very different tradition of grand narratives to offer audiences: narratives told by women, about women, and for women.[73] The subordination of female desire need not be a normative practice even in a genre as male-dominated as Japanese horror cinema:

"The paradox of pallogentricism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. ... [I]t is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies .... Woman's desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (Pulvey 14-15).

It is ironic yet oddly reassuring that the final imprint of a horror film made by a "post-moral," "postmodernist," and "misogynist" filmmaker should so definitively depict a woman transcending her "lack" and achieving her desire. That the empowered woman is a disfigured woman makes her empowerment all the more meaningful in contrast to the pathetic states in which the beautiful heroines in the two other Japanese "masterpieces" find themselves: Masago is chased off the screen by her rapist, and Sada is left clutching her lover's severed penis to make good her lack.

Moreover, if feminist critics such as Linda Williams ("When") and Laura Mulvey (19) are correct to criticize the problematic "male gaze" in horror films, their criticisms seem to have been answered by the epilogue of *Imprint* as well. As the camera closes in, Woman becomes conscious that she is being watched. Upon this, Woman turns her head around, looks into the camera and breaks into a





Returning the audience's gaze:  
Woman acknowledges the camera as  
she happily grills the one-eyed fish in  
the "mysterious" epilogue of *Imprint*.

happy smile. Though the scene is brief, we should not undervalue its importance because of its brevity. By having Woman acknowledge the camera and returning our gaze, the film has effected a subtle transfer of knowledge and power to the supposed object of our scrutiny, suggesting that Woman ultimately knows more than we do and is only letting us watch her because we are the stooges of her elaborate joke. As Jay McRoy writes,

"[I]n the Japanese popular imaginary, the gazing female eye (or eyes) is frequently associated with vaginal imagery." (*Nightmare* 7)

If so, then the combined image of Woman grilling a phallic one-eye monster *and* returning our gaze with her eyes constitutes a radical affirmation of her vaginal completeness and integrity. Amidst the expected outcries from an international "Rashomon" of outraged critics (those "American newspapermen") denouncing *Imprint's* "misogyny," perhaps two other questions that we should be asking ourselves are these:

- Which director is misogynistic for directing which film?
- Which audience is misogynistic for selecting which film as the greatest "masterpiece" of Japanese cinema?

## Coda: banning *Imprint*

Inevitably, different viewers will approach *Imprint* in different ways: for example,

- as a horror/slasher fantasy à la Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1973);
- as a macabre art house erotic thriller à la David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986);
- as a cool cult film; as a hot pink film; as a *hentai* anime performed by live actresses, or even
- as a nasty piece of flash trash.

Inevitably, too, *Imprint* will strike many viewers as a film that has exhausted its purpose once the sumptuous torture sequence starring Michie Ito is over, since kinky girl-on-girl S/M action has so much more sensational appeal for fanboys than realistic depictions of wife bashing, child abuse and abortion.

Notwithstanding, I would hope to have presented a case for seeing *Imprint* as a serious polemical film which uses its graphically exploitative *eroguro* ("erotic grotesquerie") to deliver a radical critique of male control and violence.

But the final masterstroke delivered by *Imprint* comes as a result of something that Miike didn't anticipate (or did he?[74]): the film was withdrawn from broadcast on U.S. television by Showtime. From this act of executive self-censorship, a bizarre code of ethics emerges. On the one hand, a film about "truth" which relegates the trauma of a raped woman to a non-issue is a masterpiece. On the other hand, a film which dares to expose how the conception of "truth" relegates a woman's trauma to a non-issue is an obscenity. Asked about the ban, Mick Garris has described *Imprint* as "definitely the most disturbing film I've ever seen" (Kehr par. 6) and defended the ban as a "cultural thing" (Jacobs pars 6, 10).[75] While no one can blame Garris for finding

*Imprint* disturbing, it is odd that the creator and executive producer of a horror film series which purports to deliver horror filmmaking from corporate censorship (Kehr par. 3) should be so mindful about offending his local audiences. Come to think of it, though, if *Imprint* is truly the most disturbing film Garris has ever seen, then perhaps Garris should count himself fortunate that he has never had to see anything *more* disturbing.



True horrors: dead babies and mutilated women from the massacre of Nanjing, 1937-1938.



How absurd that a work of fiction should inflame moral outrage ...



... while the truth of what real men did to real women and children ...



... should still be brazenly denied by conservative Japan to this day.

Yet, just as Woman might have told Christopher, so we might tell ourselves. We reveal our limits by the things that disturb us, but we can also transcend our limits by the way we handle our disturbances. Do we censor and deny what disturbs us, or do we try to confront and understand it? If our comfort is the only thing we care about, no wonder that powerful men in government can still get away with claiming that some of the most horrific crimes men have perpetrated against women in human history are just fantasies and fabrications; [76] that victims of sex slavery are filthy harlots and mercenary liars; [77] that war criminals are heroic samurais who should be honored in Shinto Shrines and blessed with prayers of spiritual transcendence. [78] What point is there in having lofty discussions about “truth,” “egoism” and “human nature” when the master historian, politician and philosopher’s own truth, egoism and human nature are placed above criticism? [79] Such brazen denials, to borrow a line from *Rashomon*’s Priest, are indeed “more horrible than fires or wars or epidemics” (Richie, *Rashomon* 38). I suspect, though, that branding Takashi Miike a violator of women is probably easier than holding real violators of women accountable.

People interested in Miike’s work have reacted to the banning of *Imprint* in various ways: with curiosity, disappointment, puzzlement, or understanding. [80] But throughout the controversy, Miike has remained tantalizingly polite about the way in which his patrons have pulled the rug from under him. Yet, lurking beneath the polite diplomacy of a quiet non-American deferring to his American masters may well be the knowing grimace of a true *sensei* of horror. By pretending to play Hollywood’s game while still outwitting Hollywood, this misogynistic shock peddler from the East has arguably rendered all the more

indelible the imprint of his sly exposure of Hollywood's pretension to audacity and its predictable backslide into conformity.

[Go to Notes, page 1](#)

[Go to Works cited](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



### Notes

[1] E.g.

- Rose: “He has depicted incest, drug abuse, teenage prostitution, violence against women and children, sexual perversion and necrophilia — and that was just in one film, *Visitor Q*” (par. 3).
- Von Busack: “After watching *Audition*, I was surprised to discover some critics enthusiastically proclaiming [the film] ‘feminist’ .... While I’m fond of witches, I realize they’re just the flip side of the princess stereotype” (pars. 19-20).
- Richie: “[*Audition*] is, like most of Miike’s pictures, misogynist to a degree” (*A Hundred* 223).

*Ich i the Killer* contains an infamous torture scene which shows a woman’s nipples being sliced off by a knife. The film was edited by British Board of Film Classification on account of its “extreme sexualized violence” (BBC, “Censors” par. 5). Several other films are almost as controversial:

- in *Shinjuku Triad Society* (1995), a woman falls in love with her rapist after experiencing an orgasm during her rape;
- in *Full Metal Yakuza* (1997), a woman is captured by the yakuza, shackled, gang raped and commits suicide by biting out her own tongue;
- in *Dead or Alive* (1999), a woman is captured by the yakuza, drugged, gang raped and drowned in a pool of her own excrement.

[\[return to page 1 of illustrated essay\]](#) [\[return to page 1 of text only version\]](#)

[2] E.g.

- Rucka: “*Imprint* IS twisted. But it doesn’t work” (“Review” par. 8);
- Faraci: “Sadly, *Imprint* doesn’t live up to the hype, or even most of Miike’s other work” (par. 1);
- Courtney: “The movie itself becomes nothing but a vehicle for ... disturbing images rather than the other way around” (par. 1);
- Frazer: “*Imprint* is pretty apeshit. Using that criterion, even adjusting for Miike’s warped standards, it qualifies as a must see. By any other measure, it’s a mess” (par. 3).

[3] *Imprint* was initially scheduled for broadcast in North America on 27 January 2006 (Kehr par.1). After the show was cancelled, no further broadcast was scheduled, although the broadcast subsequently went ahead in Australia, England, Japan and several other countries. Anchor Bay

Entertainment released the DVD of *Imprint* on 26 September 2006.

[4] E.g.

- Apple: “*Imprint* is nothing but trashy, only in a *bad* way” (par. 3);
- Hendrix: “The trouble with Miike is that he’s so busy dispensing gruesome visuals and stylish characters that you start to not only wonder what it all means but you wonder if he even knows what it all means and then you wonder if that matters” (par. 5);
- Sanjuro: “It’s easy to see how Miike apologists will be straining to read *Imprint* as a jab at *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *The Last Samurai*, and/or *Rashomon*. But if anything, those films seem like minor reference points .... Sure, Miike resorts to all the shock tactics we expect from him ... [but] the final product comes across as little more than a trashy, hollow, and utterly pointless self-parody” (pars. 9-10);
- Cho: “From the needle tortures to aborted fetuses, *Imprint* is the bloodied, urine soaked memoirs of a geisha .... It was a direct reminder of what Miike fans of outrage have come to champion and detractors have come to detest” (par. 7).

[5] See, e.g., BBC (“Throne”); Rayns; Tony Williams; Zine. In Britain, Miike’s films on DVD are marketed by Tartan Films as part of their “Asia Extreme” series: see Dew 53-54.

[6] E.g. Sweeney: “Snuff Film *Rashomon*” (par. 1); Park (par. 9); Kutner (par. 3); Wilson (par. 4); Robbins (par. 4).

[7] Miike:

- “Me, a ‘Master of Horror’? I’m the guy that made *Salaryman Kintaro!*” (Brown, “Report” par. 6);
- “Among horror fans overseas, films like *Audition* and *Ichi the Killer* have caused me to be misunderstood as someone who makes ‘horror-like’ films. So I guess they thought: ‘Let’s get the guy who made *Audition*’” (“Imprinting” 0:43-1:12);
- “In Europe and America, my work is limited on the abnormal side of the pendulum, extremely. I have made films that are not so abnormal” (Major 8:15-8:32);
- “To make a horror movie, I need to make at least ten wholesome and good movies in between; otherwise I get frustrated and skeptical about myself. Now that I have made *Imprint*, I may need to make twenty ‘normal’ movies before the next horror movie! ... [D]o not misunderstand me, I am not a bad-ass director who expected my episode to be ‘banned’ on TV” (Mes and Vuckovic 20).

[8] See, e.g., Anderson and Richie 455; Bock 13-14; Desser, *Eros* 13. Apart from Miike, two other filmmakers who have been mentioned as the “leading lights” of new Japanese cinema are Takeshi Kitano and Kiyoshi Kurosawa (Chute et al 37); on Kiyoshi Kurosawa as “the finest horror director working today” (13), see White. But Miike also has plenty of detractors. For example,

- Von Busack: “Naming Takashi Miike as the hottest and the latest from

the nation that gave us Ozu, Mizoguchi and Kurosawa is criticism at its most junk-food-addled” (par. 24);

- Richie: “[S]ince nothing in a Miike film is believable, nor intended to be, we are invited to regard [violence] as a spectacle, a kind of anime with real folks. Indeed, we are back in the world of pure flash” (*A Hundred* 224).

I am more inclined to agree with Chris D:

- “Miike is one of those rare birds in film, an intelligent, perceptive individual, not damaged from an overabundance of ‘arts’ education or intellectual baggage, with an unerring eye for the truth. He is unpretentious and creates intuitively from the gut” (189).
- Cf. also McRoy: “[Miike’s] range demonstrates his remarkable ability to produce a tremendously diverse body of work that simultaneously contains and exceeds a plurality of genre and genre conventions” (*Nightmare* 131).

[9] Cf. also Miike’s explanation of his non-selective approach in accepting projects:

“If I can do it, I want to do it. I won’t say, ‘I’m not into melodramas.’ I ask myself why [the producers] would want me to direct something like that. It becomes interesting. What happens if I do it? So I do films in the order the projects come to me. I only turn them down if I am busy. That’s the biggest reason. You know, I’m on this Earth to make movies. So I can’t find a reason to turn a project down” (“I am” 5:12-5:54).

[10] Iwai was born in Okayama in 1964. “Bokkee Kyotee” won two awards: the Japan’s Horror Writers’ Association Grand Prize in 1999, and the Yamamoto Award for Outstanding Writing in 2000. Her acknowledgment that she had always wanted “Miike-san” to direct “Bokkee” (“Imprinting” 3:19-3:23) in some ways reflects her own status as a popular, versatile player in Japan’s pop media. Iwai started her career as a writer of *shoojo shoosetsu* (young women’s novels) but her range has broadened to include writing short stories, essays, “serious” novels, opinion columns, as well as acting, film-producing and making regular appearances on popular television talk shows. She has a reputation for being very outspoken about sex (she nicknames herself an *ero-obahan*, or something like a “horny pushy auntie”) and has written frankly about her private life, even giving “expert” advice in an article about international penis sizes (Connell pars. 8-9). Her other interests include discussing popular social trends related to Japanese women, e.g. Japanese housewives’ obsession with Korean melodrama (Japan Today, “Japanese Marriages” par. 11), Asian men’s Oedipal complex (Schreiber, “Keeping” par. 11), and the nicknames used by professional women to describe their male acquaintances (Schreiber, “Girls” par. 16).

Horror is one of the genres in which Iwai specializes, and some of her horror short stories have been dramatized into a television miniseries *Fantasma* (2004). Iwai’s best known work is perhaps *Jiyuu Renai* (2002), a novel set in the late Taisho period and which tells the parallel story of two idealistic young



women who exchange role as wife and mistress to one man. As a study of women's experiences in the 1920s and 1930s, *Jiyuu Renai* is less sentimental and didactic than stories such as Akira Kurosawa's *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946), which depicts a spoiled rich girl miraculously changing into a selfless peasant heroine. *Jiyuu Renai* has been adapted into a commercially successful film, *Bluestockings* (2005), directed by Masato Harada. Iwai's website is:

<<http://www.shimakoteikoku.com>>.

[11] Akutagawa was born in 1892 and died in 1927. Besides being the "Father" of the Japanese short story, he is associated with Japan's most prestigious literary award, the Akutagawa Prize, which was established in 1935 by his friend Kikuchi Kan to commemorate his death, and which, until recently, had tended to be awarded to male writers. See Ashby.

[12] E.g.

- Boyd: "Essentially a study of moral psychology, the story focuses consistently on the ethical waverings of its protagonist ... [The story] stresses the inevitability of moral choice ... [and] the need, even in the absence of certainty, to make a commitment" (156; 157);
- Yamada: "The commoner is first repulsed by her immoral behavior, but slowly begins to question his own moral judgment. Discovering that he is trapped in a meaningless world, he contemplates becoming a thief for his own survival, and eventually steals the woman's clothes" (par. 8).

[13] E.g.

- Richie: "Akutagawa's point was the simple one that all truth is relative, with the corollary that there is thus no truth at all" (*Rashomon* 2);
- O'Connor: "The reader hears three radically different versions, and Akutagawa makes no effort to sort them out. Indeed, as the story makes clear, any one — or none at all — could be 'the truth.' What is truth, but a belief?" (80);
- Napier: "[T]he ghost gives a completely different, but obviously prejudiced version of the events and the final truth is never discovered" (*Fantastic* 15).

To be sure, the samurai who appears in the film is far more unreliable than the one who appears in the short story. Kurosawa acknowledges: "[E]ven the character who dies cannot give up his lies when he speaks to the living through a medium" (Kurosawa 183).

Nevertheless, we should be wary of reading the film back into the short story, and forgetting that the Woodcutter's account is an addition of Kurosawa's. In Akutagawa's version, the samurai has the last laugh, and his account is the climax of the tale. We should also remember the following literary conventions:

- male suicide is noble,
- the dead don't lie,
- he who has the last words takes the spoils, particularly when the last

words reiterate the title of the story.

Donald Keene is characteristically astute when he describes the samurai's account as "the most striking of the seven accounts" (*Dawn* 572). Otherwise, see Tsuruta 20-36. [[return to page 2 of illustrated essay](#)]

[14] In the first story, "How a Thief Climbed to the Upper Story of Rasho Gate and Saw a Corpse," which Akutagawa rewrote into "Rashomon," *Konjaku* explicitly calls the young man a "thief" (Ury 183), and the old woman's explanation comes across as poignant rather than self-serving:

"I lost my mistress, sir, and as there is no one to bury her, I brought her here. See what nice long hair she has. I'm plucking it out to make a wig. Spare me!" (Ury 183).

In the second story, "How a Man who was Accompanying His Wife to Tanba Province Got Trussed Up at Oeyama," which Akutagawa rewrote into "In a Bamboo Grove," *Konjaku* is most sympathetic towards the wife: "The woman had no way of resisting [the bandit]... [she] was helpless and had to obey" (Ury 185)

The story reserves its harshest criticism for the greedy, unscrupulous husband. In the tale, not only did the woman *not* instigate the bandit to kill her husband, she was even told by the bandit that he is sparing her husband's life as a favor to her. The tale ends with the woman's unleashing her anger on her husband: "You wretch! You good-for-nothing coward! From this day forward I'll never trust you again" (Ury 185), upon which the husband is shamed into silence: "[He] said not a word" (Ury 185). *Konjaku's* moralist reaches this scathing conclusion:

"[T]he husband was a worthless fool: in the mountains to hand his bow and arrows to someone he'd never before laid eyes on was surely the height of stupidity" (Ury 185).

This makes it all the more remarkable that Akutagawa should have rewritten the tale in favor of the husband by:

- elevating his social rank to a samurai,
- stressing his victimhood by having him die and then resurrecting him as a ghost with a powerful ax to grind,
- making the raped woman the guiltiest party of all.

[15] Howard S. Hibbett provides an interesting biographical insight into Akutagawa's attitude towards women through the description of Akutagawa's brief love affair with the "geisha" and "accomplished poetess" Shigeko Hide:

"[She] appalled Akutagawa by her 'animal instincts.' Later he congratulated himself on having escaped her, but in his imagination she remains his private Fury, the 'goddess of revenge' whose tainted, death-laden image pursues him even in the last autobiographical writings before his suicide" (440-41).

Also relevant is Akutagawa's last major work, *Kappa* (1927), which borrows

heavily from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and is a satirical novella about a madman's journey into the land of the Kappas, a race of mythical water imps. The novella is deeply skeptical about the female gender. Kinya Tsuruta summarizes:

"All the named kappas are principal characters and male, but, strangely enough, female-kappas are the dominant force in Kappaland .... Female-kappas are described as aggressive, domineering, vicious and unfair and, generally, male-kappas are depicted as victims. If Kappaland represents the womb and a male-kappa the brain, female-kappas *are* Kappaland and they do not need to be individualized and named. What Akutagawa is trying to express by this inversion is his fear of the life-force represented by the female-kappas" (42-43).

[16] Miike says of "Bokkee:"

"It had a simplicity that I liked. Also, it had that kind of story I imagined the audience telling their friends after seeing the film. It's a story that could have been told before the horror genre existed — it's more like a *kaidan* — a traditional scary story" (Schilling, "Takashi" par. 8).

[17] A draft version of Tengan's screenplay is included as a special feature on the official DVD of *Imprint*. I have quoted directly from the film whenever a discrepancy exists between the dialogue in the draft script and the dialogue in the film.

[18] To be fair, Miike has also made some controversial remarks about women, e.g.,

"Women are mysterious to me. They're not a subject that I really understand, so, in a way, I have two choices to [depict] female characters — either with violence [being done to them], or to show them as being mysterious" (Buckalew par. 1).

[19] See, e.g., Jones; Corliss; McAsey; Wilmington: [[return to page 3 of illustrated essay](#)]

"Though [Kurosawa] was himself referred to as emperor, he was prouder of being sensei, which means master, warrior, mentor and teacher" (18).

See also Alex Cox's documentary *Kurosawa: the Last Emperor* (1999).

[20]

- Jones: "Kurosawa was often rejected by his countrymen for being too 'Western'" (par. 1);
- Corliss: "Japanese audiences ... considered Kurosawa's work entirely too Western" (par. 4);
- Prince: "Kurosawa has frequently been described as the 'most Western'"



of Japanese filmmakers” (12).

[21] Among Kurosawa’s devotees are some of white Hollywood’s most formidable powerbrokers. For example,

- George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola are longtime fans who both assisted with the financing of *Kagemusha* (1980);
- Clint Eastwood virtually launched his acting career through his role in Sergio Leone’s *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), a remake of Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo* (1961);
- Martin Sorsese appears in cameo as Vincent Van Gough in *Kurosawa’s Dreams* (1990);
- Steven Spielberg hails Kurosawa as “the pictorial Shakespeare of our time” (quoted in Prince 341).

For further discussions of Kurosawa’s influence on white Hollywood, see Prince 340-58. On a side note, Spielberg is also the executive producer of Rob Marshall’s *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

[22] For anti-Orientalist criticisms of these films, see Vinh on *Kill Bill*; and Day on *Lost in Translation*. Neither should we forget the spate of Hollywood J-horror remakes such as *The Ring* (2002), *The Ring Two* (2005), *Dark Water* (2005), *The Grudge* (2004), *The Grudge 2* (2006), *One Missed Call* (2008) and so on.

[23] See above n7.

[24] Tellingly, Miike has declined to participate in Season 2 of *Masters of Horror*. Since then, the role of “token Asian” has been overtaken by Norio Tsuruta of *Ring o: Birthday* (2000) fame.

[25]

- Miike: “There’s no way I could have beaten a native English speaker. Instead, I thought it would be better to use the sort of English a Japanese person would use. In other words, if a phrase sounded all right coming from a Japanese, we would keep it, even if the grammar or pronunciation were off” (Schilling, “Takashi” par. 5);
- Miike: “It may not be perfect English, but it is unique to [the actors] and to Japanese people” (“Imprinting” 9:39-9:48).
- Iwai: “The Okayama dialect was an integral part of ‘Bokkee, Kyotee.’ All the characters spoke in Okayama dialect. I thought even standard Japanese would ruin the story. But what would happen in English? I was most concerned about this. But an interesting world was created in English nonetheless” (“Imprinting” 5:10-5:35).

[26] E.g.

- Bullock: “*Imprint* ... shares the problem of Japanese cast members struggling with English, rendering certain lines of dialogue almost incomprehensible. A decision that was obviously made for commercial reasons and which blunts much of the sense of alienation that’s inherent

in Asian horror” (par. 8);

- Sajuro: “Unless ‘Showtime’ or the producers dictated it, there’s really no compelling reason for this movie to be in English” (par. 8).

[27] Regardless of whether the ethnic diversity in Miike’s films indicates a sympathy for “rootless individuals” (Mes, *Agitator* 23) or is merely a form of “commercial multiculturalism” (Ko 136), this aspect of Miike’s filmmaking can again be contrasted with the filmmaking of Kurosawa, who tends towards a nostalgic, ethnically homogenous view of Japanese history and culture.

[28] Miike: “Because [*Imprint*] was for American audiences, we made it beautiful and scary. We didn’t restrict things to the realistic confines of the period” (“Imprinting” 19:36-19:45).

In *Django*, he takes the cross-cultural experiment he began in *Imprint* further. Obviously, “Sukiyaki Western” is a reference to Sergio Carbucci’s “Spaghetti Western” *Django* (1966), which borrowed from Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo*, which in turn borrowed from the films of John Ford. It is possible to interpret Miike’s outrageous *jidaigeki* (“period drama”) as a postmodern satire on the Meiji ideal of *wakon-yosai* (“Japanese spirit, Western technique”): an ideal which Kurosawa’s films are often said to epitomize. *Django* is loaded with references to high and popular culture from Japan and the West: e.g. the plot mentions the historical Battle of Dannoura (1185); the colors of the rival clans (Red and White) symbolize the national flag; and “Heike” and “Genji” refer to two of Japan’s most influential literary classics: the military epic *The Tale of Heike* and the courtly romance *The Tale of Genji*. If the film has a serious point, it is to celebrate the chaotic heterogeneity of Japanese culture. Among the funniest scenes in the film is the one which shows the Heike clan leader, Kiyomori, pompously renaming himself “Henry” after Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*: a scene that satirizes the over pious efforts of Japanese people like Kurosawa to portray Japanese culture through Western classics.

As a satirical *jidaigeki*, *Django* also subverts the genre’s tendency towards a romantically conservative view of history by openly acknowledging Japan’s minority indigenous people (represented by the trumpet-playing old man on the hill). Among these were the Ainu, Hokkaido’s indigenous population who were forced to assimilate into mainstream Japan under the colonial policy of the Meiji government. Even today, this issue remains something of a social taboo: see Weiner 1-16; Hogg. In June 2008, the Japanese government unexpectedly ratified a resolution to recognize the “distinct language, religion and culture” of the Ainu (Onishi, “Recognition” par. 3). However, it is unlikely that conservative Japan would take comfort from this comment by an official of the Biratori Ainu Culture Preservation Association: “It’s a good thing Japan lost World War II. If Japan had won, so many others would have lost their language and culture” (Onishi, “Recognition” par. 21).

[29] The satire of *Imprint* is made all the more incisive by the perfect casting of Youki Kudoh as “Woman.” Fans of J-pop should recognize Kudoh as the voice of the vampire-hunter Saya in Hiroyuki Kitakubo’s cult anime *Blood: the Last Vampire* (2000), and more importantly, as Pumpkin in Rob Marshall’s *Memoirs of a Geisha*. *Imprint* ingeniously plays on audiences’

knowledge of *Memoirs*. In *Memoirs*, the ragamuffin Pumpkin is a phony geisha-whore who sells out to the occupying U.S. soldiers while the heroine Sayuri is the “true” geisha who retains the spirit of geisha tradition. Yet, in this Showtime feature, Pumpkin has been cast as the intermediary of “truth” for the U.S. viewers. A more subtle role reversal is also noticeable for another part: *Imprint* has transformed *Memoirs*’ evil stepsister Hatsumomo (literally “young peach”) into the suffering Cinderella Komomo (literally “little peach”).

[30] One thing about *Imprint* that everyone seems to agree on is the badness of Drago’s acting. E.g.

- Frazer: “Billy Drago gives a performance so bad that it can only be explained by the formidable communication gap that existed between him and a director who didn’t speak his language” (par. 3);
- Rucka: “The most obvious critique I’ve heard about it is that Billy Drago’s performance is dreadful ... and to be sure, his performance is remarkably bad at points” (“Imprint” par. 9);
- Sanjuro: “Do you like bad acting? .... Billy Drago provides plenty of that, making one wonder if Miike even bothered to give him any sort direction during the filmmaking process” (par. 7).

Nevertheless, Kudoh praises her co-star extravagantly (“Imprinting” 35:06-36:03), while people who say that Drago has no acting ability at all might want to reconsider their opinion in light of his appearance in Gregg Araki’s *Mysterious Skin* (2005), where he was able to make the nonsensical line, “Make me happy, yes, yes, yes,” sound poignant and unforgettable. Against the almost universal complaint about Drago, I will defend his appearance in *Imprint* on the following grounds. First, I suggest that Drago is cast primarily for his look as a “decadent Westerner” (tall, gaunt, pallid, blond-haired, blue-eyed, etc.) and for his street credit rather than for his ability as an actor. By these criteria, Drago makes a very suitable Christopher. Second, if I am right that *Imprint* is an Orientalist critique of Western audiences’ reverence for *Rashomon*, then Drago’s “bad” acting perfectly offsets Mifune’s “good” acting, which is one aspect that Western critics have tended to overrate (cf. Yashimoto’s comment on *Rashomon*:

“The woodcutter’s expression of perplexity and the priest’s pronouncement ... are very unnatural, exaggerated, and theatrical in a bad sense” (184)).

If anything, Drago’s acting helps to intensify the eeriness of *Imprint*’s Orientalist atmosphere. Third, to complain that Drago’s acting is “bad” is to invite the question who could have done a “good” job. Even if “good” actors like, say, Robert De Niro or Liam Neeson had taken the role, it is doubtful that they could have done much with it. Neither actor, one should note, was able to save “bad” projects like *Hide and Seek* (2005) and *The Phantom Menace* (1999). Fourth, to complain that the characters lack emotional realism in a project like *Imprint* is a bit like complaining that insects talk in a project like *Bee Movie* (2007): true enough, but what’s the point? If one insists on watching a polemical satire as an emotive humanist drama, no wonder one is disappointed.



[31] See Washburn 226; Davies 342-43. The “Christ” embedded in “Christopher” could also be a reference to the Westernization of Japan under the influence of Protestant Christianity during the Meiji period.

[32] An obvious source for Christopher and Komomo is Pinkerton and Chocho from John Luther Long’s American novelette version (1897) and Giacomo Puccini’s Italian operatic version (1904) of *Madame Butterfly*. Cf. Leupp:

“Edward Saïd has suggested that in the nineteenth century western male imagination ‘Oriental’ women are ‘creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing.’ Indeed, the Japanese consort is represented in all the narratives as child-like, naive, undemanding, and sexually cooperative” (178).

But it is also useful to compare *Imprint* with two other more recent subversive retellings of the *Madame Butterfly* story. In David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1988), adapted into a film by David Cronenberg in 2003, the Orientalist fantasy is subverted by a sex change: the French diplomat René Gallimard is duped into believing that he has found the “perfect woman” in the transvestite Chinese spy Liling Song. In David Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1995), adapted into a film by Scott Hicks in 1999, the gender and race of the lovers are reversed: the Melvillian American newspaperman Ishmael Chambers pines hopelessly for the Japanese American strawberry princess Hatsue Miyamoto (played by *Imprint*’s Youki Kudoh). *Snow* is also comparable to *Imprint* in the way it uses the *Rashomon* structure — the quest for “truth” and “justice” — for a radical end: to criticize the U.S. government’s maltreatment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

[33] A more controversial subgenre of Japanese violent erotic films is the hardcore “Guinea Pig” series. These films are realistically stylized simulations of snuff films and feature many gut-wrenching spectacles of women being raped, tortured and vivisected. See McRoy, *Nightmare* 15-47.

[34] Cf. Mellen:

“Oshima also uses the color red to represent the intensity of the passion between Sada and Kichizo .... Beset by the forces that would make their love impossible, Sada and Kichizo are surrounded by red, which comes to represent the violence that emanates from their own consciousness and that will separate them forever” (*In the Realm* 16).

[35] E.g.

Linda Williams: “Any film so centered on the penis as object of desire is by definition phallogocentric” (*Hard Core* 222);

Standish: “Although Sada is clearly positioned ... as an active desiring subject, her desire is structured to overvalue the penis as the sole source of her pleasure” (262);

Lehman: “Sada’s desire ... centers almost exclusively on Kichi’s penis .... Could a man’s desire that a woman would want his penis as a keepsake lie entirely outside a phallocentric order? (180; 189).

[36] Although the Komomo torture scene is so well done that it could easily rank among the best scenes from the pink film genre, it should be noted that Miike, unlike many of his contemporaries (e.g. Kiyoshi Kurosawa), actually has no background in making pink films (Mes, *Agitator* 416). Notwithstanding, it is a mark of Miike’s originality and daring that he has already announced plans to adapt Oniroku Dan’s homoerotic S/M novel *Bishoonen* (“*Pretty Boy*”): in other words, Miike’s first pink film shall be a *gay* one. See Brown, “New.”

[Go to Notes, page 2](#)

[Go to Works cited](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### Notes (continued)

[37] It is also worth considering Miike's sober philosophy on filming violence:

“Violent scenes require a great deal of kindness for the actor as well as yourself. You don't want to let the other person down. You want to make it look good. It's full of love. Otherwise, violent scenes are hard to create. You need to trust each other” (“I am” 17:15-17:42).

[return to [page two of text version](#)]

[return to [page four of illustrated version](#)]

[38] Apart from *Rashomon*, another counterpoint for Komomo's torture is the confronting surgery scene in Kurosawa's *Red Beard*, which shows a bound naked woman undergoing an operation without anaesthetics. Although nonsexual and un-gratuitous, the scene is still phallocentric because its main purpose for displaying the woman's nakedness and suffering is to make the male doctor/hero (played by Toshiro Mifune) look skillful and professional.

[39] Cf. Iwai's thoughts on playing Komomo's torturer:

“When I heard that my role was that of a sadistic older prostitute who tortures the younger ones I thought perfect, it's scary. I think she's the scariest character in the story. But I wonder about her past. She's interesting” (“Imprinting” 29:23-29:41).

[40] Undoubtedly one of the most misogynistic types of manga/anime is the *hentai* (literally “aberrant”) genre pioneered by manga artist Toshio Maeda. The two best-known *hentai* anime titles — Hideki Takayama's *Urotsukidoji: Legend of the Overfiend* series (1987-2004) and Kan Fukumoto's *La Blue Girl* series (1992-2002) — are OVA (“original video animation”) adaptations of Maeda comics. Both series infamously feature lengthy, graphic and violent rape sequences involving nubile schoolgirls and salivating tentacle-endowed monsters. Maeda's po-faced explanation that he invented the “tentacle rape” genre to overcome Japanese censorship on male genitalia (Captain Japan par. 17) illustrates another grotesque aspect about Japanese censorship. Japanese censors apparently considered it more acceptable to show violent bestiality sex involving teenage girls than it is to show male nudity and pubic hair. For further discussions of sexual violence in manga and anime, see Pointon 2-13; Allison 51-79; Kinsella 143-46; Newitz 9-10; Buckley 184-89.

[41] Iwai:



“[The costumes] are strong and often historically impossible. Outside of the period. But somehow it does not feel out of place. It was fantastic. As far as the wardrobe of the world, [costume designer Michiko] Kitamura-san understood better than I did. I am very grateful to her” (“Imprinting” 22:43-23:03).

[42] A revised version of this essay also appears in Kamir’s full-length study *Framed: Women in Law and Film* 43-72.

[43] This is the overt moral of the source story from *Konjaku Monogatari*. See above n 14.

[44] Interestingly, the medieval text *Konjaku* appears to offer a more liberal code of sexual ethics than the twentieth-century texts “In a Bamboo Grove” and *Rashomon*. The woman in *Konjaku* is depicted as helpless during the rape and angry after the rape. Nowhere is rape presented as an issue about female dishonor and male perception of female dishonor. See above n 14.

[45a] Even though Woman’s only sin is that she’s had an unfortunate life, she tells Christopher: “I am the last woman to judge any man” (Tengan 10). By contrast, *Rashomon* would seem to suggest that a thief who has raped a woman is still entitled to judge the woman. [return to [page five of illustrated version](#)]

[45] Cf. Desser: “[I]n Japanese high and popular culture one sees images of women ranging from outright worship to hatred and fear” (*Eros* 108).

An example of a film which epitomizes this male desire and anxiety about women is Yoshiaki Kawajiri’s cult anime *Yoojuu Toshi (Wicked City)* (1987). All the women in *Wicked City* are figments of male fantasies: demons, angels, sex maniacs and sex objects. On one end of the spectrum are the “evil” powerful demons, which include a dominatrix *jorogumo* (“lady spider”) with a *vagina dentata*, and two other succubi whose bodies are literally their vaginas.

On the other end of the spectrum is the “good” human-shape demon, Makie, who seems to be androgynous at first but is subsequently exposed as female by being repeatedly and violently raped by both humans *and* tentacle monsters. The macho male hero, Taki, gets to play knight errant to Makie’s damsel in distress, until finally, she is impregnated by him and has her magical power restored as a result of her impregnation. Although the story constructs the signing of a new peace treaty as a source of hope for the future, that this so-called “new” world order is really a retreat to the old world of traditional patriarchy is confirmed by the ending. Taki and Makie consummate their relationship as Adam and Eve in a Catholic church, and Makie’s destiny is to become Taki’s wife and the mother of his child. This classic anime is typical of *hentai* in that it empowers its male audiences to relish sexual violence at the same time as allowing them to believe that they are firmly on the side on “good guys” saving the world from perverts and deviants. See Napier, “Frenzy” 342-65.

[46] Female rivalry is a familiar theme in Japanese literature. In Murasaki

Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*, for example, the jealousies of Genji's lovers would often turn into "bad spirits" to haunt other rivals and cause them to fall ill or even die. Some critics have argued that this is a "dramatic means of expressing a woman's repressed or unconscious emotions" (Shirane, *Bridge* 114); see also Bargen. Yet female rivalry is also a staple in many male narratives about women: e.g. in Nagai Kafu's novel *Geisha in Rivalry* (1918), and in Seijun Suzuki's films *Gates of Flesh* (1964) and *Story of a Prostitute* (1965), based on the novels by Taijiro Tamura. See Slaymaker 43-70.

[47] Cf.

- Linda Williams: "The destruction of the monster that concludes so many horror films could ... be interpreted as yet another way of disavowing and mastering the castration [the woman's] body represents" ("When" 88-89);
- Hand: "Examples of the monstrous-feminine ... abound in classical Japanese theatre, and the demonic woman in the Noh *kyojo-mono* ["mad woman plays"] or *shunen-mono* ["revenge plays"] subcategories, or the *akuba* or *akujo* (evil women) or *dokufo* (poison ladies) in Kabuki, are great icons of their respective forms" (24).

Although *Imprint's* Woman/Sister is probably not as dramatically effective as *Ringu's* Sadako and *Ju-on's* Kayako, one should not thereby conclude that Miike is a lesser filmmaker than Nakata or Shimizu. On the contrary, while Nakata and Shimizu's recent efforts suggest that they may be running out of tricks, three recent horror films should leave audiences with no doubt about Miike's range, ideas and technique. In *One Missed Call* (2003), Miike shows that he can do commercial J-horror using teenage heroines and sneak-up-and-cry-boo tactics as well as Nakata and Shimizu. In *The Great Yokai War* (2005), he shows that he can lighten horror into a children's adventure fantasy in the manner of Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* (1986) and Wolfgang Petersen's *The NeverEnding Story* (1984) (although Miike's monsters are distinctly Japanese).

In *Box*, a 40-minute short film for the Hong Kong-Japanese-Korean joint-production *Three ... Extremes* (2004), he shows that he can use J-horror seriously to explore the psychosexual struggle of a physically handicap young woman. "Box" symbolizes selfhood and entrapment, and the dream of the heroine, a writer named Kyoko, can be interpreted as her macabre meditation on normality. Presented in cyclical sequences that alternate between dream, memory and routine, Kyoko's dream reflects her repressed anger, desires and frustrations about being a conjoined twin. The circus symbolizes Kyoko's perception that her life is a freak show; contortionism symbolizes her yearning for agility and contrasts with the reality of her physical immobility. The colleague/editor with whom she is in love is cast in her fantasy as an abusive father in order to represent the social taboo that still overhangs sex and disability (how do conjoined twins develop sexual relationships with other people without involving some level of incest?). The plot involving the murder of her sister Shoko symbolizes Kyoko's repressed longing for independence. And the narrative reiteration that Kyoko's dream "always ends" with the beginning of a new day signals the reality that her identity can

never be separated from Shoko's. The understated approach taken by Miike does complete justice to the seriousness and sensitivity of the subject. The film challenges audiences to rethink what it means to be normal by making them participate in the heroine's nightmarish fantasy.

[48] Cf. Richie: "[I]n none of his pictures is Kurosawa even slightly interested in the why of a matter. Instead, always, *how*" (*Rashomon* 10-11).

[49] Komomo's innocent claim that she would have been "a princess in another age" could be a reference to the golden age of Japan's history which constituted one of Akutagawa's favorite literary subjects. The reference is a reminder that even the remarkable noblewomen of the Heian court, among whom lived two of history's greatest writers — Murasaki Shikibu, author of *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), and Sei Shonagon, author of *Makura no soshi* (*The Pillow Book*) — would have been "whores" had they been born in the wrong time and place.

[50] It is interesting to contrast *Imprint's* sympathy for Mother with *In the Realm of the Senses'* lack of sympathy for anyone besides Sada and Kichizo. The two unglamorous older women who appear in the film — the proprietress of the inn and the middle-aged geisha — are both violated in different ways. One is raped by Kichi; the other is left for dead after having sex with him. It is troublesome that *In the Realm's* objectification of these women has attracted hardly any critical disapproval. On the contrary, some Western critics' determination to lionize Oshima may have even led them to excuse the more questionable elements of his agenda. Thus Mellen observes (with no apparent irony) that the raped young geisha's "consent is of less concern to Oshima than her achievement of sexual maturity" (*In the Realm* 46) and that the raped proprietress' "sexual pleasure accompanies her pain and humiliation" (*In the Realm* 57).

[51] Cf. Buruma:

"There is a special genre in the Japanese cinema dedicated to maternal suffering, the so-called *hahamono*, literally 'mother things.' In these ostensible celebrations of the sacrificing, always sacrificing mother, feelings of guilt and hidden aggression are exploited with a ruthlessness that could only spring from complete innocence, or utter cynicism" (24).

In the *hahamono* told by Woman, however, there is nothing at all sentimental about the violence. Another Miike film which explores domestic violence is the controversial *Visitor Q*. According to Tom Mes, this film is about a dysfunctional family breaking out of their "duties" to regain their "natural" roles within the family unit (*Agitator* 207-15). However, I am uneasy with Mes' literal reading because there is such a huge gap between the reality of the social problems and the absurdism of the comic solutions that the film may as well be offering no solution at all. To summarize the film's grotesque solutions:

- if the only way a man can reclaim his manhood is by strangling his more successful female colleague and then raping her corpse;



- if the only way a woman can reclaim her womanhood is by lactating enough breast milk to overflow a kitchen;
- if the only way a boy can grow up is by having his parents murder his school bullies and swimming in his mother's breast milk;
- if the only way a girl can grow up is by reverting to infancy and sucking on her mother's breast,

then the maladies of modern Japan are probably beyond remedy. Against Mes' reading, I tend towards the view that the achievement of *Visitor Q* lies in its audacity to expose the taboo issues that conservative Japan would rather ignore. After exposing these issues, the film then uses comic grotesquery to avoid answering them, thereby acknowledging that no easy solution is possible and shifting the responsibility back on the viewers. Notably, "Q" is a letter that cannot be rendered precisely into Japanese (it falls outside the syllabaries *hiragana* and *katakana*), and this anomaly may signal the film's status as both social commentary and social fantasy: a fantasy which tells audiences that unless you can find a magic "Q" (puns with "cure") to fix the problems, you must fix the problems yourself.

To illustrate the extent that domestic violence remains a serious social concern in Japan, see the remarks quoted by Norrie:

- "Instances of 'violence' that aren't serious in nature, but basic and isolated, are natural among married couples" (par. 3);
- "Since old times in Japan, it has not mattered if a husband hit his wife. This is a cultural difference" (par. 12).

Against such attitudes, the suggestion that women can combat domestic violence merely by reclaiming their "nature" is almost offensive since "nature" has long been used by violent men to justify their violent behavior. See also Kawai 297-306.

[52] Even though *Rashomon* appears to present a more historically accurate portrait of pre-modern Japan than *Imprint*, it is Kinoshita's inarticulate drunkard rather than Mifune's hyperliterate noble savage who presents a more historically accurate portrait of a rural beggar. Against the tide of Western critics who were swept away by Mifune's performance as Tajomaru, it took a Japanese critic, Tatsuhiko Shigeno, to quibble that no robber would ever use words as big as those used by Mifune's Tajomaru (Richie, *Rashomon* 20).

[53a] It is relevant to understand the chase scene in *Rashomon* in light of a famous episode in Akutagawa's *Kappa*. In Kappaland, the females are sexually aggressive and would "us[e] every trick of the trade" (Akutagawa, *Kappa* 70) to catch the males. Often, a female would seduce a male and then pretend to flee from him. The narrator describes: "I remember watching once a male Kappa, almost crazed with lust, was giving chase to a she-Kappa. She was a crafty little bitch, she was; for, while making it appear, to all intents and purposes, as if she was fleeing for her dear life, she would quite deliberately stop in her tracks from time to time, or try crawling along on all fours. After a good deal of this sort of play, she allowed herself to be caught. The timing and the acting was quite perfect—for though the act of capture was comparatively

easy, she made it seem as if it was utter exhaustion that had made her give herself up” (Akutagawa, *Kappa* 71-72). This episode is said by Akutagawa’s close friend Ryuichi Koana to “reflect [Akutagawa’s] own view of the relations between men and women” (Akutagawa, *Kappa* 41).

[53] Significantly, it was the Meiji government that introduced the first penal code on abortion:

“The emperor issued a decree in 1868 banning midwives, the primary practitioners of abortion, from performing abortions. The government then codified as a crime under Japan’s first modern penal code, which was enacted in 1880. When the penal code was revised in 1907, the punishments for abortion were made more severe” (Norgren 23).

However, domestic violence never was recognized as a crime in the penal code of Meiji:

“The term ‘domestic violence’ only entered the media in 1998, and the first law to deal with spousal abuse was not introduced until late 2001” (Norrie par. 6).

This means that, in the eyes of the law, Mother is a criminal but Father is not.

[54] Besides “Rashomon” and “In a Bamboo Grove,” there is a contemporaneous short story by Akutagawa which, in terms of its macabre fascination with misogynistic violence, is highly relevant to the polemical concerns of “Bokke, Kyotee” and *Imprint*. This story is “Jigokuhen” (“Hell Screen”) (1918).

The story is set in the Heian period and is about an ingenious eccentric artist, Yoshihide, who has been commissioned by his patron, the Great Lord of Horikawa, to paint a massive decorative screen depicting the eight levels of Buddhist hell. The method-obsessed Yoshihide finds that the only way he can feel inspired to paint is by physically enacting the hellish scenes of pain and cruelty on his studio assistants. To help Yoshihide paint the centerpiece of the screen, which purports to show the decadent scene of a sinful woman being consumed by the flames of hell while riding inside a magnificent carriage, his Lordship secretly chains Yoshihide’s beloved daughter inside a carriage, sets the carriage on fire, and invites Yoshihide to watch the girl being burnt to death. When Yoshihide realizes that he has been set up, he responds in an unexpected way: he is completely entranced by the spectacle. His face lights up with the “radiance of religious ecstasy” as if “the sight of a woman suffering ... were giving him joy beyond measure” (Akutagawa 71). After witnessing this vision of “hell,” Yoshihide can finally finish the painting; and upon finishing the painting, he hangs himself. Widely hailed by critics as Akutagawa’s masterpiece, “Hell Screen” has been interpreted as Akutagawa’s devastating commentary on his own art: Akutagawa killed himself in 1927. The theme of “Hell Screen” is in keeping with the masculinist Romantic belief that in order for a man to achieve greatness, he must be prepared to sacrifice everything he holds dear, including destroying the woman who is the apple of his eye. There is a film adaptation, *Jigokuhen (Portrait of Hell)* (1969), by Shiro Toyoda.

[55] Notably, Madam's instruction to her underlings is that Komomo must *not* die. The reason is that Komomo is just too popular with the brothel's clients: "Don't touch her face. Only the body, but nowhere noticeable. Don't leave marks. She's valuable merchandise, and my property" (Tengan 19).

Cf. also Takehiro's description of Masago after her rape: "I had never seen her look so beautiful as she did at that moment" (Akutagawa 18), and Woman's description of Komomo during her strangling: "Mister, her eyes were the most beautiful I'd ever seen" (Tengan 26).

[56] Akutagawa's parable follows the simple logic: the old woman is evil; the young man uses her evil against her; so the old woman gets her just desert. For the parable to work, though, it is necessary that we do not take the inquiry further; otherwise, the moral starts to crumble. For example: Is it fair to pit a young man against an old woman? Is taking hair from a corpse morally equivalent to kicking an old woman? Is selfishness the only motive behind the old woman's explanation, given that she was taken by surprise and made to explain herself on the spot by a menacing stranger? Although the story is framed in such a way as to elicit the readers' contempt for the old woman and their grudging respect for the young man, his action indirectly proves a reality that undermines the morality of the parable: even if a woman were morally, spiritually and intellectually superior to a man, she could still be physically beaten into submission by the man. Masculine brutality does not necessarily relate to manly logic.

[57] The scroll of hell shown by the Priest to Woman could be a reference to Akutagawa's famous tale "The Spider Thread" (1918) as well as his masterpiece "Hell Screen." The picture on the scroll which depicts a man being cut in half from head to groin by the demons may also be a reference to Miike's *Ich i the Killer*, in which the anti-hero, Ichi, uses a similar technique to kill people. Besides being an in-joke for fans, the reference may have a more serious point: to contrast the film's fictional/polemical "hell" with the "hell" invoked by real religious men to oppress and sexually mutilate women. According to a recent U.N. Resolution, 130 million women and girls worldwide are the victims of genital mutilation, and a further 2 million are at risk of undergoing the harmful procedure (United Nations 3).

[58] This line did not make it into the film. However, it is an almost exact translation of a line from "Bokkee" (Iwai 13).

[59] Miike's earlier film *Fudoh: the Next Generation* (1996) also features a hermaphrodite character, Mika. Unfortunately, that film is a lesson in how to exploit hermaphroditism as a cheap, tawdry spectacle. Mika's role in the film consists of: prancing around in a sexy school girl uniform, dancing in a strip joint, shooting poison darts from her vagina, being screwed by the male hero, screwing her female teacher, and being disfigured by an acid shower in her final strip act. It is inconceivable how a critic can seriously argue that Mika is an exploration of "psychological rootlessness" (Mes, *Agitator* 101).

[60] Cf. Mellen's discussion of Masago:



“In the final story, that of the woodcutter, the woman is the most demonic. Laughing hysterically at her predicament, she calls both men fools, attacking their manhood in order to extricate herself from a situation in which she has lost all honor” (*Waves* 49).

[61] For further discussions on the Westerners' fantasies about Asian women, see Prasso.

[62] Mirroring the elaborate pattern of sexual symbolism in *Rashomon* (bamboos, water, sunlight, daggers), *Imprint* also contains an elaborate pattern of sexual symbolism. If needles, incense and guns are associated with male sexuality, then rings and ropes are associated with female sexuality. The point of this patterning is to reinforce the argument that there is really no escape for women from the burden of sexuality: they are killed by male sexuality, but they are also killed by their own sexuality.

[63] Christopher's "mistaken" killing of Komomo replays the famous scene in Tsuruya Nanboku IV's ghost play *Yotsuya Kaidan* (1825) in which the guilty Iemon mistakenly kills his new bride Oume after she appears in the image of his murdered wife Oiwa (Shirane, *Early* 871); see also Masaki Kobayashi's famous film version *Kwaidan* (1965). Komomo's words "I waited for you" pick up the *Madame Butterfly* motif as retold in Raymond Hubbell and John Golden's popular song "Poor Butterfly" (1916), the first lines of which go:

“Poor Butterfly, ‘neath the blossoms waiting.  
Poor Butterfly, how she loves him so.”

[64] The fate of Yoshihide's daughter in Akutagawa's "Hell Screen" provides another apt point of comparison with the fate of Komomo. The great Lord of Horikawa uses "art" as a pretext to punish Yoshihide's daughter for resisting his sexual advances and to burn her to death as an Oriental whore of Babylon in front of her father and his lordship's own army. Yet, the girl's violent death is treated by the story as relevant only to the extent that it touches on Yoshihide and *his* art.

[65] This "prison" motif in *Imprint* is taken up in *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A*. Like *Imprint*, *Big Bang* is an example of Miike's radical revision of his earlier films. *Big Bang*'s homoeroticism is reminiscent of *Blues Harp* (1998), a film about the unrequited love of an ambitious gangster Kenji for a drug-dealing musician Choji. Yet, whereas *Blues Harp* constructs Kenji's homosexuality as a tragic monomania and invests the ultimate hope in a heterosexual relationship (the film ends with a peaceful image of Choji's girlfriend, who is pregnant with his unborn son), *Big Bang* goes beyond *Blues Harp*'s conventional narrative to offer a more nuanced exploration of homosexuality.

Just as *Imprint* uses the misogynist premise of a woman's whoredom to expose the fallacy of this premise, so *Big Bang* uses the homophobic premise that homosexuals are unnatural criminals who should be removed from normal society to challenge the premise of society's normality. The film uses a *Rashomon*-like structure of a police investigation to reveal that the apparently-gay motivated crime committed in the prison is a corollary of the conditions of the outside world: criminality is no more attributable to

homosexuality than heterosexuality, and Kazuki's murder/suicide potentially implicates everyone: including the warden (played by *Audition*'s Ryo Ishibashi) who harbors a grudge against Kazuki for raping his wife; the bespectacled inmate Tsuchiya who is fraught with guilt about killing his unfaithful wife, and Kazuki's parents who abused him as a child. The only source of redemption is the bond between Ariyoshi and Kazuki, who yearn for an existence that transcends "natural" procreative processes (as symbolized by a pyramid that leads to "heaven" and a rocket ship that leads to "outer space"). To "become an outstanding man" is something to which a gay youth can aspire. The film's title is literally *46 okunen no koi* or *4.6 Billion Years of Love*, and its metaphysical presentation of homosexual love overturns the homophobic norm of equating homosexuality to illicit sex.

In theme, style and polemic, *Big Bang* is the antithesis of the loud and flashy *Dead or Alive* trilogy, whose final chapter presents homosexuality as so corrupt that even interspecies sexuality (between the female militia fighter June and the male replicant Ryo) is deemed more "natural." Furthermore, it is worth comparing *Big Bang* with Nagisa Oshima's *Gohatto* (1999), which features a 15-year-old Ryuhei Matsuda (who plays Ariyoshi in *Big Bang*) as an object of two samurais' homoerotic longing: for if the anaemic *Gohatto* is supposed to be a "queer" film, I suggest Master Oshima probably has a few things to learn from Miike about how to make a "queer" film. For a cogent critique of *Gohatto*, see Grossman. [return to [page six of illustrated version](#)]

[66] It is possible to tell the gender of the baby by studying his hairstyle, which is thin-cropped and short-cropped into a helmet-top to resemble the hairstyles found on traditional *goshō* dolls, which typically depict smiling, chubby, fair-skinned baby boys to symbolize good luck. But in a story like *Rashomon*, the use of the baby boy is problematic for reasons apart from its sentimentalism (Yoshimoto 184): besides perpetuating the phallocentric assumption that only the male gender can represent "universal humanity," using the baby as a trump card to end the debate obfuscates the questions that most urgently need to be asked: e.g. what if a woman is impregnated by her rapist? What is her right to terminate her pregnancy? How prominently does her plight feature in the grand scheme of "universal humanity"? Audiences can ill afford to assume that gender is irrelevant in the Woodcutter's decision to adopt the baby, given the entrenched belief in many Asian societies that girls are burdensome to the family. For a discussion of the existence of son preferences in historical Japan, see Kikuzawa (104). For a timely reminder of the practices of female infanticide in Asian societies, see BBC News ("Chinese Woman's 'Needle Ordeal'"). Cf. also Kamir: "*Rashomon*'s epilogue leaves us with a vision of a masculine Trinity: Father (woodcutter); Son (baby), and the Holy Priest" (81).

[67] Cf. Miike's *Dead or Alive 2: Birds*, which ends with the image of a newborn baby boy followed by the caption: "Where are you going"? Interestingly, the aborted fetus in *Imprint* almost completely reverses the argument of the *Dead or Alive* trilogy, which presents the procreative power of heterosexual men as the ultimate precondition of being "alive" (as opposed to being "dead"). Within the paradigm of the trilogy's exclusive focus on heterosexual manhood which the trilogy constructs as "universal," women are

relegated to subordinate, even degrading, roles: as prostitutes, strippers, rape victims, daughters, girlfriends, wives and mothers. The trilogy's unrelenting heterosexism culminates in the third part, *Dead or Alive: Final*.

This film is set in the year 2346 in an apocalyptic city which is under the control of Wu, a gay evil dictator. Wu has banned the right of heterosexuals to procreate and has introduced homosexuality as a mandatory policy to control crime and overpopulation. In *D/A Final*'s climactic showdown, the two male protagonists Ryo and Honda are fused together into one robotic body, and their faces literally become testicles of the phallic-headed robot. Their "union" symbolizes their heterosexual brotherhood and awakens them to their higher calling to defend to death their right to procreate: the phrase "dead or alive" thereby reaches its purest physical embodiment. The robot then flies off to seek vengeance on Wu, and the film ends with a second-person view of the robot interrupting Wu's sexual activity in a toilet. Wu's terrified cry of "Oh my god!" pits the defeatism of his scatological homosexuality against the potency of the robot's procreative heterosexuality.

Randolph Jordan has defended *D/A Final* against criticisms of anti-homosexuality:

"This is not a condemnation of homosexuality, but a celebration of [the option of heterosexual relationships and their role in keeping the life cycle moving]" (par. 29).

But in reply to Jordan: if a film constructs a homosexual as a straw-man villain, then pits this straw-man villain against a heroic band of heterosexual rebels in order to make a point about the biological necessity of heterosexuality, how can the film be *not* anti-homosexual? After rightly taking Tom Mes to task for whitewashing the misogyny of *Ichi the Killer* (par. 5), I don't think Jordan can afford to whitewash the homophobia of *D/A: Final*. Still, a film is not "bad" merely because it is anti-homosexual (Gaspar Noé's powerful *Irréversible* (2002) is an example of a "good" anti-homosexual film), and it is possible to acknowledge the crass homophobia of *D/A: Final* without needing to conclude that Miike is homophobic. Unlike a humanist master like Kurosawa whose body of work reflects more or less a consistent philosophy, Miike is a postmodern master whose genius lies in his ability to take up any argument and make the most of it. For every misogynistic like *Ichi* and homophobic film like *D/A: Final*, there is a gender-conscious film like *Imprint* and homoerotic films like *Gozu* and *Big Bang Love* to balance the pendulum.

In particular, *Gozu* deserves to be recognized as one of the most brilliant allegories of repressed homosexuality. The film charts the journey of Minami, an apprentice yakuza, who has reluctantly been assigned to kill his beloved mentor/"brother" Ozaki. Minami is spared from doing anything when Ozaki accidentally dies and the body disappears. Minami then embarks on a quest through Nagoya to find Ozaki's body. Along the way, he encounters various bizarre characters, who may personify various aspects of Minami's own fears and desires. When Minami finally tracks down the "body," he finds that his mentor has reincarnated into an attractive young woman. The film tricks audiences into thinking that finding the female Ozaki is the end of Minami's

odyssey, and the final scene is set up as a standard heterosexual sex scene. But the scene proceeds only as far as seduction, foreplay and penetration: suddenly a hand reaches out of the woman's vagina and takes hold of Minami's penis. Minami then watches the woman give birth to an adult-sized Ozaki, who squirms his way out of the woman to greet Minami. After the birth, the female Ozaki shrivels up and is restored to life in a tub of water. The film ends with the happy *ménage à trios* strolling arm in arm in the city. Though easy to dismiss as just another lurid Miikesque stunt, the birth of Ozaki actually provides a cogent conclusion to Minami's psychosexual journey: it shows that what Minami needs is not the sex of procreation but the sex that produces the object of his repressed homosexual desire.

Cf. Mes: "[*Gozu*] tells the simple tale of a man who wants his male companion to admit that he loves him and wants to sleep with him. It requires the illusion of heterosexuality ... to get him there, but once he has owned up to his true feelings this illusion quite literally splits apart to reveal its true face" ("*Gozu*").

The fact that Ozaki is played by Sho Aikawa from the *Dead or Alive* trilogy ("Minami Ozaki" is also the pseudonym of a famous *yaoi* or "boy love" manga artist) makes the film's cross-references all the more intriguing.

[68] Besides *Rashomon*'s baby, I can think of two other references for the fetus. First, the fetus could be a critique of Akutagawa's *Kappa*: Kappaland has a birthing ritual which involves the Kappa father shouting loudly into the Kappa mother's birth canal to ask the Kappa fetus whether it wishes to be born; if the fetus answers "no," then the fetus is aborted (Akutagawa, *Kappa* 61-62). This flippant treatment of abortion differs from the unflinching way in which "Bokkee" and *Imprint* present abortion as a woman's issue. Second, the fetus could be a critique of the ending of *Madame Butterfly*: Cho-cho's willingness to allow Pinkerton and his American wife to adopt her son perpetuates the Orientalist myth that an Asian woman's life is subordinate to the "greater good" of Western primogeniture.

[69] Tengan's screenplay cleverly extracts every meaning out of the word "scare."

E.g. Woman: "I feel closer to the dead than the living. The livings are the ones who really *scare* me" (Tengan 8).

Showing Woman the scroll of hell, the Priest says:

"Pretty *scary*, huh? ... Listen to me now: if you do bad things, you'll go to hell. If you want to go to heaven, you must do all good things" (Tengan 13-14).

[70] Richie has dismissed *Audition* as a "[l]ittle boy paranoia about creepy girls" (*A Hundred* 265) and he is not entirely wrong: *Audition* cannot be a "feminist" film because at a basic level it is just a male fantasy turned male nightmare. A misguided middle-aged widower tries to find himself a wife by holding a fake audition. He falls in love with one of the women, who turns the table him by exacting a punishment that far outstrips the seriousness of his



crime. The film does nothing to examine, promote, empower or liberate women; it merely displaces the viewers' uneasiness about the man's misdemeanor with their complete horror at the woman's sadism. Tellingly, the grotesque bloodletting is interrupted by the man's son, who kills the witch by kicking her down a flight of steps; the viewers' sense of relief thus coincides with the restoration of patriarchal order. Accordingly, Miike is right to reject a "feminist" reading of the film (Miike, "*Audition* Interview" 9:13-10:15). See also Hantke 54-65:

"Myself, I might be something of a feminist. Perhaps the actors also become feminists, but I don't want to set an example. Seeing the film this way and seeing it again, the flaws of the man who appears to be the enemy gradually disappear. He is a good man, he is friendly and he doesn't do anything bad. I didn't want to make a film about a bad man who in the end is a reformed character."

[71] "Cool" is a word that has often been used to describe Miike. For example, one blogger writes: "[*Imprint*] was cool as Hell, it freaked me out and was extremely well made, so that's all that matters in my humble opinion" (Jsyn par. 9). Miike himself says of *Django*: "I want to make a film that will make audiences think 'Japanese are cool!'" (J. M. Anderson par. 2) In contrast, Richie uses the word almost contemptuously:

"Like the rest [of Miike's films], [*Audition*] ... delivers the advertised goods with a dead-faced indifference which meets all the demands of contemporary cool" (*A Hundred* 223).

Among U.S. filmmakers, the only person who can rival Miike in "cool" is arguably Miike's *Django* collaborator, Quentin Tarantino. Yet, the valid criticism against Tarantino that he is an addict of "cool" — "Tarantino has now been the coolest filmmaker on the planet for more than 10 years. It's time he got over it because an addiction to cool is death for an artist" (Byrnes par. 1) — cannot be made against Miike: for not only has Miike a much wider range than Tarantino, he can also subvert his own coolness to antagonize his fans in a way that the eager-to-please Tarantino seems unwilling or unable to do.

[72] Cf. Kurosawa's working relationship with Machiko Kyo:

"She came in to where I was still sleeping in the morning and sat down with the script in her hand. 'Please teach me what to do,' she requested, and I lay there amazed" (Kurosawa 183).

[73] In a society which still expects many of its women to conform to the Meiji ideal of *ryosai kenbo* (being "good wives, wise mothers") and whose popular media frequently portrays its women as infantile and submissive, it is worth remembering that Japan remains one of the world's few major civilizations whose definitive cultural text — *Genji Monogatari* by Murasaki Shikibu — was written by a woman for a predominately female readership. On Shikibu's equally brilliant contemporary and rival, Sei Shonagon, Keene writes:

"[Shonagon] is a woman of matchless wit who again and again

demonstrates her intellectual superiority to any man who ventures to engage her in conversation .... She not only associated with them as equals, but did not hesitate to assert her superiority when a man seemed an unworthy adversary .... In later times, [her] thought would be frowned upon by the military rulers, and relations on an equal footing between men and women were definitely not advocated by the Confucian philosophers” (*Seeds* 413, 426).

See also Sarra 222-64; and Oba 20-23.

[74] Miike:

“To tell you the truth, I was not surprised to hear that *Imprint* would not air. Through the experience of directing this episode, I have discovered that while humor can have its limits, fear has no limits. I could not suppress the volume of terror that this film conveys” (Anchor Bay 2006, par. 4).

It is tempting to read between the lines and interpret this as Miike’s oblique way of telling Americans that they are short on humor and excessive in fear. Cf. Miike’s comment elsewhere:

“I felt sorry, and unhappy [that *Imprint* was banned from US television] .... America is the Land of the Free, isn’t it? ” (Mes and Vuckovic 18).

[75] As an Asian Australian who first saw *Imprint* when it premiered on Australian television on 23 May 2006 on Foxtel Australia — the cable provider which also offers me Fox News and Fox Sport — I am curious to ask Garriss which “thing” in my “culture” has made it more acceptable for me to watch *Imprint* on TV than for the viewers in North America.

[76] For denials of the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers throughout Asia during World War II, see Higashinakano; Takemoto and Ohara; Hongo. For controversies surrounding revisionism in Japan’s history textbooks, see Steinglass. Otherwise, see Honda; Chang; Rees. If the simulated torture of an actress playing a fictional character can be described as horrific, then no adjective would be strong enough to describe the methods used by Japanese soldiers to torture and kill numerous Chinese women in Nanjing: driving pikes through the wombs of gang-raped victims; bayoneting the stomachs of pregnant women to remove their unborn fetuses: Honda 119-22, 153-58; Chang 89-99; Rees 31-34, 37-41; Tanaka, *Hidden Horrors* 79-80. See also Bill Guttentag’s and Dan Sturman’s documentary *Nanking* (2007).

[77] See, e.g., Tanaka, *Comfort Women*; Chan; Tabuchi; Onishi, “Japan”; Harden. See also the full-page advertisement put out by forty-four members of Japan’s parliament entitled “THE FACTS” in *Washington Post* on 14 June 2007.

[78] The most controversial War Shrine in Japan is undoubtedly Tokyo’s Yasukuni Jinja, which includes 14 Class-A war criminals among the 2.46

million war dead whose souls the Shrine claims to commemorate. Every visit to Yasukuni by a Japanese prime minister is bound to become an international diplomatic incident. See, e.g., Brasor; Kamiya. For a shrewd discussion of Yasukuni's passive-aggressive glorification of militant nationalism under the pretext of spiritualism, see Nelson. As a pacifist film, *Imprint* challenges the belief that crimes against humanity can be purged away so easily. The status of Woman and Komomo as victims of male violence is symbolized by the paper pinwheels they hold at various moments in the film. When Christopher curses himself for making the mistake of coming to this "infernal" island, Woman corrects him: "It doesn't matter where you go. Your hell follows you" (Tengan 38).

[79] We can only speculate what political views Kurosawa had, and Akutagawa would have had, about their nation's role in World War II. Akutagawa died more than a decade before the war broke out; but as a member of the Taisho literati, his disgust at Japan's turn towards militarism was evident in his short story "Shogun" ("The General") (1924), a caustic satire on the Russo-Japanese war "hero" Maresuke Nogi. The story contains a shocking scene in which the General gleefully watches a Chinese spy being decapitated. Yet, if *Rhapsody in August* (1991) is any indication of Kurosawa's political views, then the Emperor of Celluloid would appear to belong to the significant portion of Japan's population who regard themselves as innocent victims of foreign aggressions during World War II. Yomota Inuhiko writes:

"Many critics, myself included, thought Kurosawa chauvinistic in his portrayal of the Japanese as victims of the war, while ignoring the brutal actions of the Japanese and whitewashing them with cheap humanist sentiment" (quoted in Prince 322).

See also Ehrlich. Significantly, Kurosawa also co-wrote the screenplay *Escape at Dawn* (*Akatsuki no dasso*, 1950): a love story about a sensuous Manchurian comfort woman and a Japanese soldier. Donald Keene has also raised an interesting point about *Rashomon*:

"The film, produced in Japan while the war crime trials were still fresh in people's memories, suggested the difficulty of ever establishing from the testimony of witnesses what really had taken place" (*Dawn* 572).

If this is right, one may interpret *Rashomon*'s negative portrayal of Masago as a conservative male attack on the credibility of the rape allegations made during the military trials.

Cf. Richie: "Once asked why he thought *Rashomon* had become so popular, both in Japan and abroad, [Kurosawa] answered: 'Well, you see ... it's about this rape.' Everyone laughed" (*Rashomon* 11).

[80] For a sample of fan's reactions to the banning of *Imprint*, see the discussion string on HorrorWatch.com.

[Go to Works Cited](#)

---



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Works cited

Akutagawa, Ryunosuke. "The General." In *Hell Screen and Other Stories*. Trans. W. H. H. Norman. Tokyo: Hokuseido P, 1948. 135-167.

----- . *Kappa: a Novel*. Trans. Geoffrey Bownas. Intro. G. H. Healey. Rutland: C. E. Tuttle Co., 1971.

----- . *Rashomon and Seventeen Other Stories*. Trans. Jay Rubin. Intro. Haruki Murakami. London: Penguin, 2006.

Allison, Anne. *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan*. Boulder: Westview P, 1996.

Anchor Bay Entertainment. "Press Release: IDT Entertainment's Anchor Bay Entertainment Announces Exclusive DVD Release of Takashi Miike's *Imprint* from *Masters of Horror*." *Underland Online* 16 Jan. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008. <<http://www.phantasmagoriaonline.com/main/pressreleases/archives/jan06/press16.shtml>>.

----- . "Press Release: Anchor Bay Entertainment Proudly Presents *The Masters of Horror Season One Box Set*." *TV Shows on DVD.com* 29 Jul. 2007. 27 Jun. 2008. <<http://www.tvshowsondvd.com/newsitem.cfm?NewsID=7570>>.

Anderson, Jeffrey M. "Takashi Miike Saddles Up for English-Language Spaghetti Western." *Cinematical* 20 Nov. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008. <<http://www.cinematical.com/2006/11/20/takashi-miike-saddles-up-for-english-language-spaghetti-western/>>.

Anderson, Joseph L., and Donald Richie. *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*. Expanded Ed. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.

Apple, Alex. "Imprint: Review." *Snowblood Apple* Apr. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008. <<http://www.mandiapple.com/snowblood/imprint.htm>>.

Ashby, Janet. "New Akutagawa Winners Offer Hope." *Japan Times* 4 Mar. 2004. 27 Jul. 2008. <<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/ek20040304br.html>>.

Bargen, Doris G. "Spirit Possession in the Context of Dramatic Expressions of Gender Conflict: The Aoi Episode of the *Genji Monogatari*." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48.1 (1988): 95-130.

Bock, Audie. *Japanese Film Directors*. Tokyo; New York: Kodansha International, 1978.

Boyd, David. "Rashomon: From Akutagawa to Kurosawa." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 15.3 (1987): 155-58.

Brasor, Philip. "Notes on Yasukuni and a Week that will Live in Infamy." *Japan Times* 20 Aug. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/fd20060820pb.html>>.

Braun, Kyle. "Interview: Mick Garris: Director of *Valerie on the Stairs*." *Underground Online* [Undated]. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.ugo.com/channels/filmtv/features/mastersofhorror/garris.asp>>.

British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC]. "Censors Slash 'Extreme' Japanese Film." *BBC News* 13 Nov. 2002. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2465265.stm>>.

----- . "Japan Film's Throne of Blood." *BBC News* 25 Feb. 2004. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/film/3517957.stm>>.

----- . "Chinese Woman's 'Needle Ordeal.'" *BBC News* 7 Sep. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6983435.stm>>.

Brown, Don. "Report: Japan Premiere of Miike Takashi's *Big Bang Love, Juvenile A*." *Ryuganji: Japan Film News* 22 May 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.ryuganji.net/news/index.php?entry=entry060523-104118>>.

----- . "New Miike." *Ryuganji: Japan Film News* 24 Oct 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.ryuganji.net/news/index.php?entry=entry061024-041944>>.

Buckalew, Brett. "Gozu's Wacky Auteur." *FilmStew.com* 18 Aug. 2004. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.filmstew.com/ShowArticle.aspx?ContentID=9448>>.

Buckley, Sandra. "'Penguin in Bondage:' A Graphic Tale of Japanese Comic Books." *Technoculture*. Ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991. 163-95.

Bullock, Saxon. "Imprint: Review." *Channel 4* [Undated]. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.channel4.com/film/reviews/film.jsp?id=160160&page=2>>.

Burns, Catherine. *Sexual Violence and the Law in Japan*. London, New York: Routledge, Curzon, 2005.

Buruma, Ian. *A Japanese Mirror: Heroes and Villains of Japanese Culture*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1984.

Byrnes, Paul. "Film Review: *Death Proof*." *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 Dec. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.smh.com.au/news/film-reviews/death-proof/2007/11/02/1193619127685.html>>.

Chan, Royston. "Chinese Woman Breaks Silence on Sex Slavery Horror." *Reuters* 25 June 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSPEK2283220070625?feedType=RSS&sp=true>>.

Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

China News Digest. "Nanjing Massacre: 300,000 Chinese People Killed, 20,000 Women Raped." *China News Digest* 1994 – 2001. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.cnd.org/njmassacre>>.

Cho, Ben. "When Hou Met Kuriyami: The Hong Kong International Film Festival Turns 30." *Senses of Cinema* May 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/festivals/06/40/hkiff-2006-ben-cho.html>>.

Chute, David, Travis Crawford, Olaf Möller and Chuck Stephens. "12 Contenders." *Film Comment* 38.1 (2002): 37-46.

Connell, Ryann. "Rising Up in Protest over the Long and Short of Penis Size." *Mainichi Daily News* 20. Dec. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://tokyolifer.spaces.live.com/Blog/cns/C15CE2153B2A6689!2422.entry>>.

Corliss, Richard. "Akira Kurosawa: A Master Filmmaker with an Eye for Darkness and Complexity." *Time Magazine* 5 Nov. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<[http://www.time.com/time/asia/2006/heroes/at\\_kurosawa.html](http://www.time.com/time/asia/2006/heroes/at_kurosawa.html)>.

Courtney, Bill. "Movie Review: Takashi Miike's *Imprint*." *The Uranium Café* 30 Dec. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://my.opera.com/billinbeijing/blog/takasi-miike-s-imprint>>.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

Davies, Arthur. "Columbus Divides the World." *Geographical Journal* 113.3 (1967): 337-44.

Day, Kitty. "Totally Lost in Translation." *Guardian* 24 Jan. 2004. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1130137,00.html>>.

D [Desjardins], Chris. *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Films*. New York; London: L. B. Tauris, 2005.

Desser, David. *The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1983.

----- . *Eros Plus Massacre: an Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.

Dew, Oliver. "‘Asia Extreme’: Japanese Cinema and British Hype." *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5.1 (2007): 53-73.

Ehrlich, Linda C. "The Extremes of Innocence: Kurosawa's *Dreams* and *Rhapsodies*." In *Hibakusha Cinema*. Ed. Mick Broderick. New York, London: Kegan-Paul, 1996: 160-77.

Erickson, Steve. "Casting about Takashi Miike's Corrosive *Audition*." *The Phoenix.com* 29 Nov. — 6 Dec. 2001. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://bostonphoenix.com/boston/movies/documents/02024664.htm>>.

----- . "Anything But Banal: Takashi Miike on *Gozu* and His Ups and Downs." *indieWire* 29 Jul. 2004. 27 Jul. 2008.

<[http://www.indiewire.com/article/anything\\_but\\_banal\\_takashi\\_miike\\_on\\_gozu\\_and\\_his\\_ups\\_and\\_downs/](http://www.indiewire.com/article/anything_but_banal_takashi_miike_on_gozu_and_his_ups_and_downs/)>.

Faraci, Devin. "DVD Review: *Masters of Horror: Imprint*." *Chud.com* 7 Oct. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.chud.com/articles/articles/7810/1/DVD-REVIEW-MASTERS-OF-HORROR---IMPRINT/Page1.html>>.

Frazer, Bryan. "*Imprint* (2006)." *Deep-Focus.com* 2 Oct. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<[http://www.deep-focus.com/dfweblog/2006/10/imprint\\_2006.html](http://www.deep-focus.com/dfweblog/2006/10/imprint_2006.html)>.

Foucault, Michael. "What is an Author?" (1970). In *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*. Ed. Josué V. Harari. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP: 141-60.

Grossman, Andrew. "*Gohatto* — or the End of Oshima Nagisa?" *Bright Lights Film Journal* 33 (July 2001). 27 Jun. 2008.

<<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/33/gohatto1.html>>.

Hand, Richard J. "Aesthetics of Cruelty: Traditional Japanese Theatre and the Horror Film." In McRoy, *Japanese Horror Cinema* 18-28.

Hantke, Steffen. "Japanese Horror under Western Eyes: Social Class and Global Culture in Miike Takashi's *Audition*." In McRoy, *Japanese Horror Cinema* 54-65.

Harden, Blaine. "Japan Warns US House Against Resolution on WWII Sex Slaves." *Washington Post* 18 Jul. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content>



</article/2007/07/17/AR2007071701802.html>>.

Harritz, Pia D. "Consuming the Female Body: Pinku Eiga and the Case of Sagawa Issei." *In Medias Res* 2 (2005). 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.mediavidenskab-odense.dk/index.php?id=57>>.

Hendrix, Grady. "Imprint Review." *Kaiju Shakedown* 8 Apr. 2006. 10 Jan. 2008.

Hibbett, Howard S. "Ryunosuke Akutagawa and the Negative Ideal." In *Personality in Japanese History*. Ed. Albert M. Craig and Donald H. Shively. Berkeley: U of California P, 1970: 425-51.

Higashinakano, Shudo. *The Nanking Massacre: Fact Versus Fiction: A Historian's Quest for the Truth*. Trans. Sekai Shuppan. Tokyo: Sekai Shuppan, 2005.

Hogg, Chris. "Japan Racism 'Deep and Profound.'" *BBC News* 11 Jul. 2005. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4671687.stm>>.

Honda, Katsuichi. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*. Ed. Frank Gibney. Trans. Karen Sandness. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999.

Hongo, Jun. "What Massacre? LDP, DPJ Ranks Hear Nanjing Denial Lecture." *Japan Times* 7. Mar. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20070307a5.html>>.

Horror Watch. "What Happened to Takashi Miike? (*Masters of Horror*)."  
*HorrorWatch.com*. 17 Jan. 2006 — 21 Jul. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<[http://www.horrorwatch.com/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic\\_id=2856&forum=14&post\\_id=30239](http://www.horrorwatch.com/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id=2856&forum=14&post_id=30239)>.

Hunter, Jack. *Eros in Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema*. London, San Francisco: Creation Books, 1998.

Hutchinson, Rachael. "Orientalism or Occidentalism? Dynamics of Appropriation in Akira Kurosawa." In *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*. Ed. Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim. London: Wall Flower P, 2006. 173-87.

"Imprint" *Official Homepage* [Japanese]. 2005. *Eiga.com*. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.eiga.com/official/imprint/introduction/index.html>>.

"Imprinting." *Masters of Horror: Imprint*. 2005. DVD Featurette. Dir. Hidetoshi Oneda. IDT Entertainment, 2006.

"I am the Film Director of Love and Freedom: Takashi Miike." 2005. *Masters of Horror: Imprint*. 2005. DVD Featurette. Dir. Hidetoshi Oneda. IDT Entertainment, 2006.

"Imprint." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. 13 Jul. 2008. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imprint\\_%28Masters\\_of\\_Horror\\_episode%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imprint_%28Masters_of_Horror_episode%29)>.

Iwai, Shimako. *Bokkee, Kyotee*. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1999.

----- . Homepage. 2006 — 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<<http://www.shimakoteikoku.com>>.

Jacobs, Evan. "Interview: Mick Garris Tells You Everything You Need to Know about *Masters of Horror* Season 2." *Movie Web* 27 Oct. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<<http://www.movieweb.com/tv/news/43/15443.php>>.

Jancovich, Mark, ed. *Horror: The Film Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Japan, Captain. "Manga Artist Interview Series (Part I): Toshio Maeda." *The Big Empire: Sake-Drenched Postcards* 9 Dec. 2002. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<<http://www.bigempire.com/sake/manga1.html>>.

Japan Today. "Japanese Marriages Falling Victim to 'Yongfluenza'." *Japan Today* 17 Jul. 2004. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<<http://www.asiafinest.com/forum/lofiversion/index.php/t50920.html>>.

Jones, Josh. "The Emperor and the Gangster." *PopMatters* 22 Sep. 2003. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<<http://www.popmatters.com/film/features/030922-kurosawa.shtml>>.

Jordan, Randolph. "Suicide is for the Birds: Takashi Miike's Tales of De-territorializing Flight at *Fantasia* 2003 and Beyond." *Off Screen* 31 Oct. 2003. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<[http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new\\_offscreen/fantasia2003\\_pt2.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/fantasia2003_pt2.html)>.

Jsyn. "First Look: Takashi Miike's *Imprint*." May 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<[http://iconsoffright.com/A\\_IMPRINT.htm](http://iconsoffright.com/A_IMPRINT.htm)>.

Kamir, Orit. "Judgment by Film: Socio-Legal Functions of *Rashomon*." *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 12.1 (2000): 39-88.

----- . *Framed: Women in Law and Film*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.

Kamiya, Setsuko. "Kin of War Dead Protest Yasukuni Visits." *Japan Times* 16 Aug. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20070816a3.html>>.

Kawai, Hayao. "Violence in the Home: Conflict between Two Principles — Maternal and Paternal." In *Japanese Culture and Behavior: Selected Readings*. Ed. Akie Sugiyama Lebra and William P. Lebra. Rev. ed. Honolulu:

U of Hawaii P, 1986. 297-306.

Keene, Donald. *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984.

----- . *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature from Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century*. New York: Henry Holt, 1993.

Kehr, Dave. "Horror Film Made for Showtime will not be Shown." *New York Times* 19 Jan. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/19/arts/television/19horr.html?ex=1295326800&en=84baa9f9c0fa31fe&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>>.

Kikuzawa, Saeko. "Family Composition and Sex-Differential Mortality Among Children in Early Modern Japan: Evidence from Yokouchi, 1671-1871." *Social Science History* 23.1 (1999): 99-127.

Kimiya, Setsuko. "Kin of War Dead Protest Yasukuni Visits." *Japan Times* 16 Aug. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20070816a3.html>>.

Kinsella, Sharon. *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society*. London: Curzon P, 2000.

Ko, Mika. "The Break-up of the National Body: Cosmetic Multiculturalism and the Films of Miike Takashi." In *Theorising National Cinema*. Ed. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen. London: British Film Institute, 2006. 129-37.

Kurosawa, Akira. *Something Like an Autobiography*. Trans. Audie E. Bock. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982.

Kutner, C. Jerry. "Miike's Imprint." *Bright Lights after Dark*. 4 Oct. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://brightlightsfilm.blogspot.com/2006/10/miikes-imprint.html>>.

Lee, Marc. "Filmmakers on Film: George Lucas." *Telegraph* 14 May 2005. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2005/05/14/bffilmmakers14.xml>>.

Lehman, Peter. *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993.

Leupp, Gary P. *Interracial Intimacy in Japan: Western Men and Japanese Women, 1543-1900*. London, New York: Continuum, 2003.

Major, Wade. "Interview with Miike." *Gozu*. 2003. Dir. Takashi Miike. DVD Special Feature. Pathfinder Pictures, 2004.

Masters of Horror. Official Website. 2008. 4 Apr. 2009.  
<[www.mastersofhorror.net/](http://www.mastersofhorror.net/)>.

McAsey, Brian. "Kurosawa, the Emperor of Cinema." *BeatRoute Magazine* November 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<[http://www.beatroute.ca/view\\_archived\\_article.php?id=23&sectionID=10&articleID=562](http://www.beatroute.ca/view_archived_article.php?id=23&sectionID=10&articleID=562)>.

McRoy, Jay, ed. *Japanese Horror Cinema*. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2005.

----- . *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2008.

Medine, David. "Law and Kurosawa's *Rashomon*." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 20.1 (1992): 55-60.

Mellen, Joan. *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan through Its Cinema*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

----- . *In the Realm of the Senses*. London: British Film Institute, 2004.

Mes, Tom. *Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike*. Rev. Ed. Surrey: FAB P, 2006.

----- . "Gozu; or How the Ghost of Lynch went to Buddhist Hell." *Gozu*. 2003. Dir Takashi Miike. DVD Special Feature. Pathfinder Pictures, 2004.

----- , and Kuriko Sato. "Interview: Takashi Miike." *Midnight Eye* 1 May 2001. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<[http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/takashi\\_miike.shtml](http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/takashi_miike.shtml)>.

----- , and Jovanka Vuckovic. "Miike's Torture Theatre Unveiled." *Rue Morgue* 59 (August 2006): 16-20.

Miike, Takashi. "Interview." *Audition*. 1999. Dir. Takashi Miike. DVD Special Feature. Siren Visual Entertainment, 2002.

----- . "Takashi Miike Interview 1." *Shinjuku Triad Society*. 1994. *Black Society Trilogy*. Dir. Takashi Miike. Special Edition DVD. Artsmagic, 2004.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). In *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989: 14-26.

Napier, Susan J. *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

----- . *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

----- . "The Frenzy of Metamorphosis: the Body in Japanese Pornographic Animation." In *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema*. Ed. Dennis Washburn and Carole Cavanaugh. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 342-65.



Nelson, John. "Social Memory as Ritual Practice: Commemorating Spirits of the Military Dead at Yasukuni Shinto Shrine." *Journal of Asian Studies* 62.2 (2003): 443-67.

Newitz, Annalee. "Magical Girls and Atomic Bomb Sperm: Japanese Animation in America." *Film Quarterly* 49.1 (1995): 2-15.

Norgren, Christiana A. E. *Abortion before Birth Control: the Politics of Reproduction in Postwar Japan*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

Norrie, Justin. "Behind Closed Doors, the Violence Continues." *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 Mar. 2008. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/behind-closed-doors-the-violence-continues/2008/03/21/1205602658044.html>>.

Nygren, Scott. *Time Frames: Japanese Cinema and the Unfolding of History*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007.

Oba, Minako. "Without Beginning, Without End." In *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing*. Ed. Paul Gordon Schalow and Janet A. Walker. Trans. Paul Gordon Schalow. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. 19-40.

O'Connor, Patrick J. "Recommended: Ryunosuke Akutagawa." *English Journal* 75.7 (1986): 79-80.

Onishi, Norimitsu. "Japan Again Denies Role in Sex Slavery." *New York Times* 26 Mar. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/26/world/asia/26cnd-japan.html?ex=1187582400&en=bdb4b3dddaod723d&ei=5070>>.

----- . "Recognition for a People Who Faded as Japan Grew." *New York Times* 3 Jul. 2008. 27 Jul. 2008.

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/03/world/asia/03ainu.html?\\_r=1&n=Top/News/World/Countries%20and%20Territories/Japan&pagewanted=all&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/03/world/asia/03ainu.html?_r=1&n=Top/News/World/Countries%20and%20Territories/Japan&pagewanted=all&oref=slogin)>.

Otto, Jeff. "Interview: Takashi Miike." *IGN.com* 22 Jul. 2004. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://au.movies.ign.com/articles/532/532760p2.html>>.

*Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.oed.com/>>.

Park, Sun-Yi. "Leaving a Mark: Takashi Miike's *Imprint*." *Twitch* 13 Mar. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://twitchfilm.net/archives/009346.html>>.

Pinedo, Isabel Cristina. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. Albany, New York: State U of New York P, 1997.

Pointon, Susan. "Transcultural Orgasm as Apocalypse: *Urotsukidoji: The Legend of the Overfiend*." *Wide Angle* 19:3 (1997): 41-63.

Prasso, Sheridan. *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient*. New York: Public Affairs, 2005.

Prince, Stephen. *A Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*. Rev and Expanded Ed. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

Rayns, Tony. "From Tokyo, Without Love." *The Independent* 18 Mar. 2001. 27 Jul. 2008.

<[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4158/is\\_20010318/ai\\_n14367394](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_20010318/ai_n14367394)>.

Rees, Gavin. "Getting Busy with Takashi Miike." *Guardian Unlimited* 17 Mar. 2001. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,6737,458009,00.html>>.

Rees, Laurence. *Horror in the East: Japan and the Atrocities of World War II*. Cambridge: Da Capo P, 2002.

Richie, Donald, ed. *Rashomon*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1987.

----- . *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: a Concise History, with a Selective Guide to DVDs and Videos*. Rev. Ed. Tokyo; New York: Kodansha International, 2005.

----- , and Joan Mellen. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.

Robbins, Edward. "Imprint (2006, dir Takashi Miike)." *Solarmanite Sketches* 23 Nov. 2006 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://solarmanitesketches.blogspot.com/2006/11/imprint-2006-dir-takashi-miike.html>>.

Rose, Steve. "Blood Isn't That Scary." *Guardian* 2 June 2003. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,968798,00.htm>>.

Rucka, Nicholas. "The Death of J-Horror?" *Midnight Eye* 22 Dec. 2005. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.midnighteye.com/features/death-of-j-horror.shtml>>.

----- . "Review: Imprint." *Midnight Eye* 13 Sep. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.midnighteye.com/reviews/imprint.shtml>>.

Sanjuro. "Review: Imprint." *Love HK Film.com* 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://lovehkfilm.com/panasia/imprint.htm>>.

Sarra, Edith. *Fictions of Femininity: Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women Memoirs*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.

Schilling, Mark. "Takashi Miike Makes His Mark." *Japan Times* 23 Jun.

2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/ff20060623i1.html>>.

----- . "Dial J for Horror." *Japan Times* 23 Jun. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/ff20060623a1.html>>.

Schreiber, Mark. "Keeping a Watch out for Oedipal Wrecks." *Japan Times* 23 Jul. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

----- . "Girls Employ Secret Lingo to Fool the Guys." *Japan Times* 20 Jan. 2008. 27 Jul. 2008.

Shikibu, Murasaki. *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Edward G. Seidensticker. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.

Shirane, Haruo. *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of the Tale of Genji*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987.

----- , ed. *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology 1600-1900*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002.

Shonagon, Sei. *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*. Trans. Ivan Morris. New York: Columbia UP, 1991.

Slaymaker, Douglas. *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction*. New York: Routledge, Curzon, 2004.

Smith, Greg M. "Critical Reception of *Rashomon* in the West." *Asian Cinema* 13.2 (2002) 115-28. 27 Jul. 2008.

< <http://www2.gsu.edu/~jougms/Rashomon.htm>>.

Standish, Isolde. *A New History of Japanese Cinema*. New York: Continuum, 2005.

Steinglass, Matt. "New History, Old Wounds." *Boston Globe* 18 Feb. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2007/02/18/new\\_history\\_old\\_wounds/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2007/02/18/new_history_old_wounds/)>.

Sweeney, R. Emmet. "Feature: "Imprint: Takashi Miike's Snuff Film *Rashomon*." *IFC.com* 28 Sep 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.ifc.com/news/2006/09/feature-imprint-takashi-miikes.php>>.

Tabuchi, Hiroko. "Japan's Abe: No Proof of WWII Sex Slaves." *Washington Post* 1 Mar. 2007. 27 Jul. 2008.

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/01/AR2007030100578.html>>.

Takemoto, Tadao, and Yasuo Ohara. *The Alleged "Nanking Massacre:" Japan's Rebuttal to China's Forged Claims*. Tokyo: Meiseisha, 2000.

Tanaka, Toshiyuki. *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview P, 1996.

----- . *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the U.S. Occupation*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Tengan, Daisuke. "Imprint — Based on the Novel *Bokke Kyoutei* by Shimako Iwai." Dialogue Polish by Mick Garris. 19 Sep. 2005. *Masters of Horror: Imprint*. DVD Special Feature. Anchor Bay, 2006.

Tsuruta, Kinya. "'The Hell Screen,' 'In a Grove,' 'Kappa.'" In *Approaches to the Modern Japanese Short Story*. Ed. Thomas E. Swann and Kinya Tsuruta. Tokyo: Waseda UP, 1982. 11-43.

Turim, Maureen. *The Films of Oshima Nagisa: Images of a Japanese Iconoclast*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.

United Nations General Assembly. "Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly: The Girl Child." A/RES/62/140. 19 February 2008. 27 Jul. 2008. <<http://www.un.org/ga/62/resolutions.shtml>>.

Ury, Marian, tr. *Tales of Times Now Past: Sixty-Two Stories from a Medieval Japanese Collection*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1979.

Vinh, Khoi. "The Kill Bill Tour of Japan." *Subtraction* 23 Oct. 2003. 27 Jul. 2008. <[http://www.subtraction.com/archives/2003/1022\\_the\\_kill\\_bill.php](http://www.subtraction.com/archives/2003/1022_the_kill_bill.php)>.

Von Busack, Richard. "Slice of Life." *Metroactive* 13-19 Sep. 2001. 27 Jul. 2008. <<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/09.13.01/tokyopop-0137.html>>.

Washburn, Wilcomb E. "Japan on Early European Maps." *Pacific Historical Review* 21.3 (1952): 221-36.

Weiner, Michael. *Japan's Minorities: the Illusion of Homogeneity*. London; New York: Routledge, 1997.

White, Jerry. *The Films of Kiyoshi Kurosawa: Master of Fear*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge P, 2007.

Whitmore, Stuart. "Asian of the Century: Kurosawa Akira." *Asia Week* 18 Sep. 1998. 4 Apr. 2009. <<http://cgi.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/features/aoc/aoc.kurosawa.html>>

Williams, Linda. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989.

----- . "When the Woman Looks." In *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams.



Los Angeles: UP of America, 1984. 83-99.

Williams, Tony. "Takashi Miike's Cinema of Outrage." *CineAction* 64 (2004): 54-62.

Wilmington, Michael. "Akira Kurosawa 1910-1998." *Film Comment* 35.1 (1999): 18.

Wilson, Staci Layne. "Masters of Horror: *Imprint*." *Horror.com* 22 Sep. 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<<http://www.horror.com/php/article-1383-1.html>>.

Yamada, Marc. "Adapting Akutagawa: Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and the Problem of Narration." *Film Journal*. Issue 9. Jul. 2004. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<<http://www.thefilmjournal.com/>>.

Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. *Kurosawa: Films Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.

Zine, Phil. "The Japanese Noir of Takashi Miike." *Phil-Zine* 10 August 2006. 27 Jul. 2008.  
<<http://philzine.wordpress.com/2006/08/10/the-japanese-noir-of-takashi-miike/>>.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## The dangers of biosecurity: *The Host* and the geopolitics of outbreak

by [Hsuan L. Hsu](#)

Released in July 2006, Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* [*Gwoemul*] garnered both widespread popularity as the highest grossing South Korean film in history and critical acclaim, screening at the Cannes, New York, and Toronto film festivals. The film is often regarded as either a South Korean version of a Hollywood monster movie or a comic inversion of the traditional monster film. When it was released in the United States and other Western countries in 2007, *The Host* received rave reviews in venues ranging from *Rolling Stone* to *The New Yorker*. Many of these reviews focus on the film's computer-generated monster, comparing it to classic films like *King Kong* (1933), *Godzilla* (1954), and *Jaws* (1975); *New York Magazine* praised *The Host* as "one of the greatest monster movies ever made!" (Hill) However, Bong himself has described having a more vexed relation with traditional monster films:

"I have a real love and hate feeling towards American genre movies. I'll follow the genre conventions for a while, then I want to break out and turn them upside-down" ("The Host"—Bong Joon-Ho Q & A).

[1]

[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Writing in *The New York Times*, Manohla Dargis attributes the film's originality to this dissolution of genre conventions:

"The Host' is a loose, almost borderline messy film, one that sometimes feels like a mash-up of contrasting, at times warring movies, methods and moods. Mr. Bong would as soon have us shriek with laughter as with fright. But it's precisely that looseness, that willingness to depart from the narrative straight and narrow, that makes the film feel closer to a new chapter than a retread" (Dargis).

As it unfolds through a series of digressions, fictional news clips, and multiple subplots, *The Host* combines generic conventions from monster movies, epidemiological outbreak narratives, news reportage, melodrama, and slapstick comedy. Early in the film, a gigantic amphibious creature emerges from the Han River, attacks dozens of bystanders, and kidnaps Hyun-seo, the daughter of the film's protagonist, Gang-du. Fearing that the creature carries a mysterious virus, the South Korean military steps in and quarantines Gang-du's entire family, along with anyone else who may have been exposed to the creature. When the family learns that Hyun-seo is still alive, Gang-du, his two siblings, and his father escape from quarantine in order to rescue her. As the family scours the sewers of South Korea's capital city in search of the monster, the U.S. government and World Health Organization decide to circumvent the threat of an epidemic by treating the Han River area with an experimental biocide, Agent Yellow. Koreans organize a mass demonstration against the use of Agent Yellow, but the chemical is deployed just as the family and the monster meet to fight.



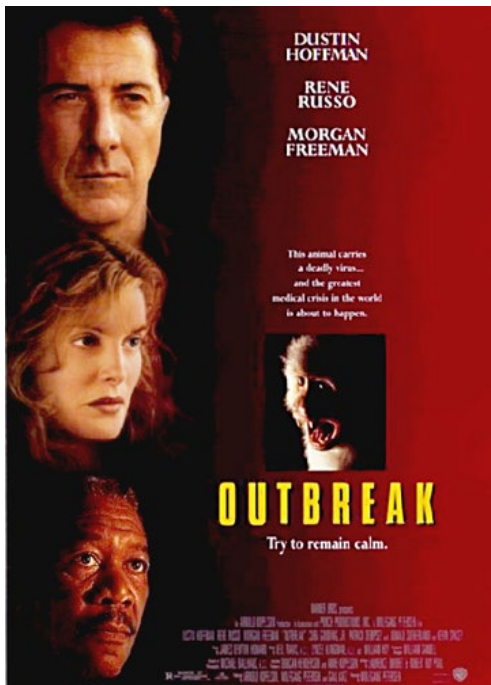
Publicity posters for *The Host* bill it as a monster movie, downplaying its epidemiological plot elements.



The predatory, amphibious monster featured in *The Host* is influenced by Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975).



*Godzilla* (1954) and other movies featuring radioactively mutated monsters also influenced the development of *The Host*'s toxic monster.



Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995) — in which a monkey carrying an Ebola-like virus is brought to the U.S. — helped popularize concerns about contagious emerging diseases originating in underdeveloped countries.

Following this final confrontation, Gang-du matures from a layabout to a responsible parent, assuming responsibility for an orphan who was held captive in the creature's mouth. Throughout the film, Bong inserts passing references to politically charged events ranging from the U.S.-led "war on terror" and the hooded detainees at Abu Ghraib to the 1980s South Korean democratization protests and recent concerns about SARS and avian flu.

Without denying the film's resonances with classic monster movies, this essay will argue that *The Host* can be productively interpreted as a revision of the popular epidemiological plot that Priscilla Wald has described as the "outbreak narrative"—a genre that legitimates Western scientific interventions and discourses of "development" while effectively blaming the results of underdevelopment on its victims. Through its intertwined genealogies of monstrosity, contagion, and biological hazard, *The Host* presents a critique of U.S. and international interventionism that stretches from the Korean War and the post-1997 structural adjustments imposed by the IMF to the biological and environmental harm caused by toxic dumping and chemical warfare. The film's focus quickly shifts from the amphibious creature—whose most spectacular exploits occur within the first fifteen minutes of the narrative—to the monstrous measures imposed by international interests more concerned with preserving the health of the population than with sustaining South Korea's capacities for social welfare and economic self-determination. The film thus shows how paranoid narratives of epidemiological outbreak mask the neoliberal economic reforms that have undermined traditional family life and the means of social reproduction associated with food, family support, and a healthy environment. Because *The Host* proceeds in the mode of pastiche—explicitly alluding to a range of popular films and genres that include *Jaws*, *Outbreak*, and news clips from the invasion of Iraq—my argument will pursue various points of origin for the film's numerous environmental, economic, evolutionary, and social embodiments of monstrosity.

## Toxic debt

"In another news report, we learn that the South Korean "industrial economy lauded by every U.S. President since Kennedy has mutated overnight into a nightmare of 'crony capitalism' in the twinkling of the I.M.F.'s eye" (Cumings 1998, 16).... [W]hat one reads in a novel about alcoholism and domestic abuse among construction workers in Seoul can also be linked to the distant machinations on Wall Street and in Washington." — Amitava Kumar, "Introduction" to *World Bank Literature* xviii-xix

Every fictional monster has its origins, and more often than not these lie in widespread anxieties about social and economic stability. As Annalee Newitz puts it in her study of monster narratives in U.S. popular culture,

"The extreme horror we see in these stories—involving graphic depictions of death, mutilation, and mental anguish—is one way popular and literary fictions allegorize extremes of economic boom and bust..." (12).

In its opening scenes, *The Host* offers multiple genealogies for its amphibious monster. The first of these is based on an incident that occurred in 2000, when Albert McFarland, the U.S. military mortician at the Yongsan camp, ordered two assistants to dump about 80 liters of formaldehyde into a sewage system that drains into the Han River. The incident outraged South Koreans, and has often been cited by demonstrators protesting against U.S. military presence and by environmental activists. One *Korean Times* editorial, for example, notes that the



Han River “supplies drinking water for over 10 million citizens,” and highlights the symbolic violence inherent in this act, asking,

“Are Koreans disposable people?” (“Editorial”).

McFarland’s light punishment—a thirty day suspension by the United States Forces Korea and a \$4,000 fine by South Korea’s Ministry of Justice—further angered protestors who felt that Koreans and their environment were “disposable” to occupying U.S. forces.

The formaldehyde dumping scene in *The Host* emphasizes the U.S. scientist’s awareness of—and disdain for—the regulations he is violating. The first words of the movie—“Mr. Kim, I hate dust more than anything”—draw attention to the incommensurability between cleaning up the military morgue and dumping toxic waste in the river. The doctor orders a Korean assistant to dump the bottles of “dirty formaldehyde” because “every bottle is coated with layers of dust.”[2] When the assistant protests that the chemicals will end up in the river, the mortician responds,

“The Han River is very broad, Mr. Kim. Let’s try to be broad-minded about this.”

The dialogue caricatures not only McFarland but also the cynical discourse of liberal universalism, which claims to be “broad-minded” while allowing and even initiating the despoiling of vulnerable environments and their inhabitants.

*The Host*’s widely noted anti-Americanism should also be situated in the context of ongoing demonstrations against U.S. military bases. On May 4, just before the July release of *Gwoemul* in South Korea, a demonstration protesting the expansion of a U.S. military base in the vicinity of Pyeongtaek was violently confronted by the South Korean military, who injured over two hundred people. In following weeks, demonstrations against the U.S. military presence spread. Two thousand students marched from Seoul to Pyeongtaek, chanting,

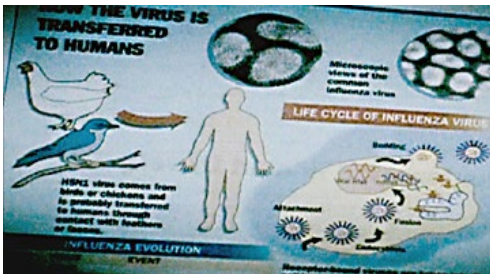
“Yankees go home! This is our land!” (Persaud).

Even the closures of many USFK bases were criticized by environmental groups, since South Korea accepted the closures despite eighteen months of debate about the environmental conditions of the sites (Slavin). In all these cases, the Korean government and military made clear concessions to the U.S., whether by suppressing protestors or by failing to exact adequate redress for environmental harm.

Immediately following the formaldehyde scene, Bong provides a second origin story for the mutated river monster at the center of his film. Years after the toxic dumping incident, and a few months after a miniscule mutant creature bites the hand of a man fishing in the river, a businessman commits suicide by jumping from a bridge into the Han River. Situated between the appearance of the small creature a few months earlier and the emergence of the full-fledged beast in the following scenes, this suicide seems to play a key role in the monster’s prodigious growth. The businessman may be the first human meal it eats. Furthermore, since Bong notes that such suicides in the Han River happen “almost every day,” the monster’s growth may be directly correlated to conditions affecting the Korean economy and those whose livelihood depends upon it (Bong, “Audio Commentary”). South Korean newspapers in the last decade have referred to suicides by unemployed or bankrupt businessmen as “IMF suicides,” linking the causes of their despair to the neoliberal structural adjustment program imposed by the IMF after the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997.[3] In light of this second origin story for Bong’s monster, which links it to the epidemic of suicides resulting from South Korea’s decimated economy, *The*



This shot of disease control agents dressed in white biohazard suits typifies *The Host*’s theme of epidemiological risk.



This staged news clip from *The Host* visually associates the virus supposedly carried by the monster with avian influenza.



Ironically, the army mortician orders the “dirty formaldehyde” dumped because the bottles are gathering dust.

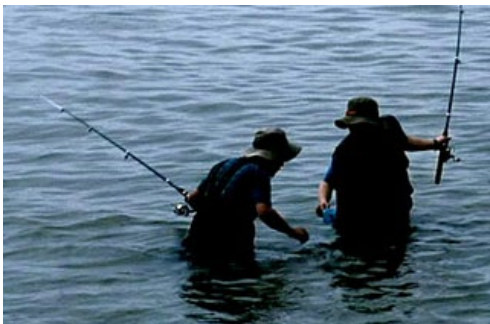




This tracking shot multiplies the threat posed by the formaldehyde bottle.



A superimposition visually connects the empty bottles with the waters of the Han River.



The fisherman uses his cup to scoop up a small mutated, squid-like creature—presumably a young version of the full-grown monster.

*Host* turns out to be an allegory not just of U.S. military occupation but also of neoliberal market reforms.

Bong is not alone in making films about the post-crisis economic situation: *Oldboy* (2003), directed by his friend Park Chan-Wook, dramatized the dismantling of Korean business conglomerates (*chaebols*) guided by the state and also included a digressive episode in which the protagonist encounters a suicidal businessman (see Jeon). Rob Wilson, in a study of carnal and violent eruptions of “killer capitalism” in post-9/11 Korean cinema, identifies Park as a leading practitioner of

“IMF-noir’ [a term coined by Jin Suh Jirn], reflecting tensions and phobias released in Korea, as across inter-Asia, by the monetary and fiduciary crisis of 1997, unmasking globalism” (127).

The liberalization of trade, labor markets, and investments imposed by the IMF in the wake of the 1997 crisis has had devastating effects on South Korea’s economy. State-guided corporations and banks (whose collective success prior to the crisis had been touted as the “Miracle on the Han River”) were rapidly privatized, and businesses stayed afloat by cutting jobs. Economists James Crotty and Kang-Kook Lee attribute South Korea’s social and economic instability to an influx of finance capital that has made “[t]he Korean stock market...a gambling casino for foreigners” interested in “short-term speculative profit rather than long-term growth” (671, 673). Sociologist Walden Bello adds that, since 1997,

“The IMF has touted Korea as a “success story.” However, Koreans hate the Fund and point to the high social costs of the so-called success. According to South Korean government figures, the proportion of the population living below the “minimum livelihood income”—a measure of the poverty rate—rose from 3.1 per cent in 1996 to 8.2 per cent in 2000 to 11.6 per cent in early 2006. The Gini coefficient that measures inequality jumped from 0.27 to 0.34. Social solidarity is unraveling, with emigration, family desertion, and divorce rising alarmingly, along with the skyrocketing suicide rate.” (Bello)

The nation’s “inadequate” welfare system (Crotty and Lee 671), widespread unemployment, and unraveling social fabric suggest that, in economic as well as environmental terms, neoliberalism has transformed Korean citizens into “disposable people.”[4] Austerity measures imposed by the IMF have not only decimated social services in South Korea, but also damaged its environment:

“The ratio of the Ministry of Environment’s budget to total finance fell from 1.51 percent in 1997 to 1.38 percent and 1.36 percent in 1998 and 1999, respectively. In order to attract foreign investment the South Korean government, on the advice of the IMF, has abolished or weakened various regulations. For example the government has removed the Green Belt Regulation, reorganised National Parks and weakened the regulations protecting sources of drinking water” (Chomthongdi).



This businessman's suicide references an epidemic of Han River suicides following the IMF crisis.



The white collar worker's jump is later echoed by the monster's dive into the river from the same bridge.

The businessman's suicide associates the film's overgrown, preternaturally mobile, computer-generated (by The Orphanage and Weta Digital, international firms based in California and New Zealand), voracious, flexible, and acrobatic beast with the post-crisis attrition of welfare and the means of social reproduction. The monster may have literally fed on the skyrocketing number of suicides precipitated by the dismantling of the pre-1997 state-guided economy.

These two originary scenes help account for the English-language title of Bong's film in international screening: whereas *Gwoemul* is best translated as "monster" or "creature," the much more ambiguous term "host" encompasses, among other things, questions about international hospitality. "*The Host*" blurs the distinction between the monster and the society it ravages. From its inception the movie asks: Isn't South Korea playing host, arguably against the interests of its citizenry, to the U.S. military and to foreign investors who have no interest in the nation's social fabric? Despite its incompetence and palpable absence when it comes to confronting the monster, the Korean military plays an active role in the film in enforcing a quarantine and suppressing demonstrations by its own citizens. Since the word "host" combines notions of hospitality, hostility, and armed forces, it significantly blurs the distinctions between the creature, the Korean army, and the nation's hospitality to foreign influences. *The Host* is not the first monster movie to allegorize economic and social ailments. However, the international scope of the film's satire calls for an analysis that triangulates between international interventions, the South Korean state, and the family of average (or below-average) Korean citizens who do battle with the monster. The following sections of this paper examine how national and international responses to the threat posed by the monster are structured by a pursuit of "immunization" that neglects and hinders processes of social reproduction and thus exacerbates already existing risks of economic, environmental, and public health crises.



The creature first appears hanging beneath the Wonhyo Bridge.



In this scene from Park Chan-Wook's *Oldboy* (2003), the protagonist grabs a business man attempting to commit suicide by jumping from a roof.

The impoverishment of South Koreans following the IMF bailout is indirectly referenced in this introductory shot, in which a boy (whom we later recognize as the character Se-ju) attempts to fend off hunger by stealing food from Gang-du's family snack booth.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



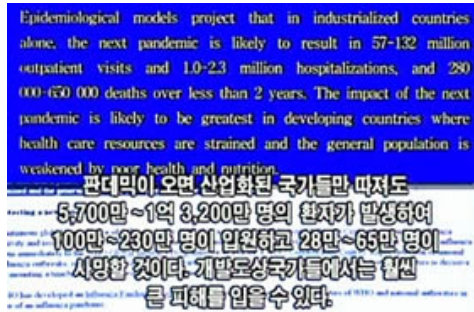
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Outbreak and emergency



In this news clip that was cut from the final version of *The Host*, highlighted text from a World Health Organization URL warns that underdevelopment, poverty, and unevenly distributed health resources could lead to an impending influenza pandemic: “The impact of the next pandemic is likely to be greatest in developing countries where health care resources are strained and the general population is weakened by poor health and nutrition.”



A street scene shows the breakdown of public life in the wake of fears of an epidemic. Face masks recall those worn widely during the SARS outbreak.

“With the past decisions on nuclear energy and our contemporary decisions on the use of genetic technology, human genetics, nanotechnology, computer sciences and so forth, we set off unpredictable, uncontrollable and incommunicable consequences that endanger life on earth.”—Ulrich Beck

While it invokes numerous associations having to do with hosts, occupants, hostages, and hostility, the film’s English-language title more directly draws attention to the fatal disease that the creature supposedly carries. Directly influenced by Hollywood films about biological threats[5][[open endnotes in new window](#)], this outbreak narrative erupts when an U.S. sergeant who fought the monster develops a skin infection and the government declares the vicinity of the Han River a biohazard zone. The film’s plot then shifts from the conventional military confrontation with a monster to a more mediated and abstract struggle against a contagious disease. Rather than combating the disease vector—the monster itself—the state deploys medical specialists to examine citizens who may have had contact with the virus, and it mobilizes the army to manage the movements and contacts of Seoul’s inhabitants. Bong’s interpolation of a satirical outbreak narrative into his monster movie suggests that discourses of biosecurity may constitute the real threat to the everyday well-being of South Korea’s population.

In recent years, a range of biological and environmental threats have made the possibility of massive public health crises a prominent issue in debates about international security. In the wake of anxieties provoked by the AIDS crisis, multiple viruses such as SARS, avian flu, mad cow disease, and the West Nile Virus raise the specter of widespread international epidemics. Likewise, the threat supposedly posed by scenarios of bioterrorism involving anthrax, ricin, or emerging infectious diseases[6] has linked fears of biological epidemics to xenophobic anxieties about the porous borders of nations and bodies. Discourses and practices of biosecurity focus on containing risk and minimizing contagion in cases of dramatic outbreak, thus deemphasizing the various forms of structural violence that make particular groups and regions vulnerable to a range of maladies, both “natural” and artificially induced.

Discourses of biosecurity are at once nationalist in sensibility and transnational in scope. They encompass—and often pathologize—vulnerabilities in health, resources, and infrastructure produced by centuries of colonial and post-colonial exploitation. They often reproduce what Roberto Esposito has called an “immunization paradigm,” which he opposes to the reciprocity of *communitas*:

“We can say that generally *immunitas*, to the degree it protects the one who carries it from risky contact with those who lack it, restores its own borders that were jeopardized by the common” (27).

Insofar as it “implies a substitution or an opposition of private or individualistic models with a form of communitary organization,” immunization aptly describes the process by which states and international organizations protect themselves from “risky contact” with groups that have been rendered “risky” by the global community itself—by processes of colonization, occupation, war, and disinvestment that have decimated environmental, familial, and economic foundations for public health (27).





*Them!* depicts scientists struggling to exterminate giant ants genetically mutated by nuclear tests in the Southwestern U.S..



*28 Days Later* (2002) is a post-apocalyptic horror movie set in the wake of an outbreak of the experimental virus, "Rage."

With the increase in public health concerns about emerging diseases, biosecurity has become a prominent theme in popular nonfiction, novels, and films. Genres that have been described as "biothrillers," the "killer virus novel," and the "outbreak narrative" have dramatized the horrifying threats posed by emerging diseases, the epidemiologically risky conditions of developing countries, and the heroic interventions of Western scientists in arresting the spread of contagion. Cinematic representations of emergent threats—which play a key role in reproducing "common sense" anxieties about biosecurity—can be traced from monster movies about nuclear proliferation, such as *Godzilla* (1954) and *Them!* (1954), to the anticipatory resonances with the AIDS outbreak that Daniel Selden has identified in *Jaws* (1975) and the Ebola scare dramatized in Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995).[7]

Writing about U.S. representations of contagion, Priscilla Wald traces the development, in both popular culture and medical discourse, of the "outbreak narrative," a subgenre that dramatizes the outbreak and eventual suppression of horrific biological threats. She describes

"the proliferation in the United States since the late 1980s of tales of contagious and infectious diseases emerging in Africa and posing a global threat until contained by dedicated—often maverick—public health officials and scientists in the United States whose triumphs allow them to reclaim modernity. The stories, which enable a displacement of the uncontrollable and *domestic* threat of AIDS onto those infections, are therefore at least as reassuring to a Western audience as they are alarming." (691)



Biohazard suits from *Outbreak*.



While his suit echoes the biohazard suits from *Outbreak*, this Korean agent in *The Host* is shown to be incompetent from the moment he slips and falls when striding into the room.



Gang-du is seized and quarantined at the hospital as a result of his contact with the monster.



"I can't give any of that information without the approval of the U.S."

Citing popular films, fiction, and nonfiction such as *Outbreak*, Patrick Lynch's *Carriers* (1996), and Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone* (1994), Wald uncovers a metanarrative in which

"an increasingly interconnected world disturbs the lair of an archaic entity, a virus depicted as lying in wait, and thereby brings modernity itself into conflict with a forgotten past, emblemized by a disease against which contemporary technology is (initially) ineffective: the return of a colonial repressed" (690-1).

At stake in such narratives is a pathologizing projection of vulnerabilities reproduced—if not enabled in the first place—by modernization into foreign spaces, as well as a misleading confidence that the solution to such crises in public health lies in further biomedical research, rather than addressing economic and infrastructural inequalities. For example, the notion that epidemics result from a lack of exposure to Western hygiene, knowledge, and technologies diverts attention from the extent to which the increasing incidence of emerging diseases results from the expanded scope and mobility of biological vectors caused by climate change or the increased vulnerability to disease caused by the privatization of water sources and health care. In addition, such narratives downplay the resurgence of older, curable diseases such as cholera and polio in nations deprived of resources by debt repayments and structural adjustments imposed by the IMF and World Bank. Bong's awareness of the international, economic sources of epidemiological vulnerability are evident in a news clip that was edited out of the film. The clip includes a shot of the WHO website, with a highlighted passage stating,

"The next pandemic is likely to result in 57-132 million outpatient visits and 1.0-2.3 million hospitalizations, and 280,000-650,000 deaths over less than 2 years. The impact of the next pandemic is likely to be greatest in developing countries where health care resources are strained and the general population is weakened by poor health and nutrition" (Bong, "Deleted News Clips").

By exaggerating both the threat posed by emerging infectious diseases and the efficacy of Western science in treating them, outbreak narratives mask the economic motives behind many "global health" initiatives. In "Security, Disease, Commerce: Ideologies of Postcolonial Global Health," Nicholas King provides a lucid account of an "emerging diseases worldview" characterized by U.S. interests in surveilling and managing epidemiological risks throughout the developing world (767). King shows that discourses of biosecurity are shaped not only by humanitarian motives but also by U.S. economic stakes in the health of people around the world. A 1997 report by the National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine titled *America's Vital Interest in Global Health*, for example, notes,

"America has a vital interest and direct stake in the health of people around the globe.... Our considered involvement can serve to protect our citizens, enhance our economy, and advance US interests abroad" (ctd in King 771).

Thus, as King notes, U.S. institutions like the Centers for Disease Control and private investors in infrastructure and information services would benefit from a "global surveillance network" designed to identify and respond to epidemiological outbreaks. In the long run, the "emerging diseases worldview" bolstered by popular outbreak narratives attempts to distribute Western medical technologies and promote healthy populations

"in an effort to foster the integration of underdeveloped nations into the world capitalist economy" (780).

Perhaps the most catastrophic fault of such an approach is its blindness to the significant role of inequality in producing disease vulnerabilities: "In its report on





This image of Gang-du hooded and detained invokes photographs of hooded prisoners at Abu Ghraib.



The U.S. Centers for Disease Control appears in news footage during the WHO announcement of a “policy of direct intervention.”



Agent Yellow is associated, in the news footage, with U.S.-led campaigns in the Middle East.



emerging infections,” Paul Farmer notes, “the Institute of Medicine lists neither poverty nor inequality as ‘causes of [disease] emergence’” (261-2). *The Host* presents an incisive critique of the racial, colonial, and liberal presumptions that underlie the outbreak narrative. As the film develops its outbreak plot, a news program included in the film reports that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control analyzed tissue samples from the infected U.S. officer, and

“confirmed that the creature from the Han River, as with the Chinese civet wildcat and SARS, is the host of this deadly new virus.”[8a]

The effects of toxicity have travelled full circle: from the bottles of formaldehyde in a U.S. military morgue to the body of an officer treated at a U.S. military hospital. Ironically, as the biosecurity emergency comes into effect in Seoul, we are shown a brief decontextualized news clip in which an U.S. physician is stating,

“I can’t give any of that information without the approval of the United States.”

The emergence and characteristics of the virus are from the outset extraterritorial in nature: symptoms develop in the body of an American exposed to an entity created by U.S. toxic waste, treated in a “U.S. military hospital,” and further analyzed at the CDC. Details about the virus are U.S. state secrets. The mere knowledge that a virus exists is enough to justify a state of emergency and to manage the movements and affect of Seoul’s citizens accordingly.

When Gang-du and his family escape from the hospital, we glimpse a news program reporting that the United States and other nations are concerned that “Korea is not adequately quarantining the infected.” Even after Gang-du is recaptured (with a black hood labeled “Biohazard” placed over his head), we learn,

“The U.S. and WHO, citing the failure of the Korean government to secure the remaining two family members or to capture the creature in question, have announced a policy of direct intervention.”



Agent Yellow is first shown in a pod whose shape resembles the monster’s body.



Compare this shot of the host’s first appearance on the bridge with the Agent Yellow deployment pod.

Further news reports—all of them accompanied by images that refer to campaigns in the Middle East, avian flu, and SARS—reveal the form that this intervention will take:

“Agent Yellow, which has been chosen for use here in Korea, is a state-of-the-art chemical and deployment system recently developed by the U.S. to fight virus outbreaks or biological terror. This extremely powerful and effective system, once activated, completely annihilates all biological agents within a radius of dozens of kilometers.”

In Bong’s parody of biosecurity measures, “biological terror” is combated by killing

In a scene that evokes the democratization protests of the 1980s, citizens of Seoul protest the deployment of Agent Yellow at the Han River.



The pod releases the biocidal chemical agent.



The American doctor with his Korean American translator.



"There is no virus whatsoever."

every living thing in the endangered area. Depending on how many "dozens of kilometers" are affected, the experimental deployment of Agent Yellow could potentially depopulate the entire city of Seoul. Of course, since the monster was created in the first place by a biocidal chemical (formaldehyde), this second dose of hazardous chemicals could potentially lead to further mutations, and even more monstrous biological threats—not unlike the ongoing ecological and biological devastation produced by its namesake, Agent Orange, in Vietnam.[8] The visual resemblance between the hanging yellow pod that delivers Agent Yellow and the pod-like shape of the monster underscores the circular logic behind this use of one chemical agent to fight the effects of another. As the film builds to its climax, the international community's plans to deploy Agent Yellow lead to a mass demonstration at the quarantined Wonhyo Bridge. The final battle between Gang-du's family and the monster is suggestively juxtaposed against the demonstration against foreign intervention in the name of biosecurity. Having so recently engaged in bitter democratization demonstrations in the 1980s, Korean citizens now mobilize—both within and beyond the film—against international encroachments upon their sovereignty.

In a provocative critique of the U.S. shift towards a militarized, preemptive approach to dealing with emergent environmental and biological threats, Melinda Cooper argues that "social, biological, and environmental reproduction" are increasingly being viewed as matters of national security (92). Under the emerging agenda established during the Bush administration, war

"is no longer waged in the defense of the state (the Schmittian philosophy of sovereign war) or even human life (humanitarian warfare; the human as bare life, according to Giorgio Agamben [1998]), but rather in *the name of life in its biospheric dimension, incorporating meteorology, epidemiology, and the evolution of all forms of life, from the microbe up*" (98). [emphasis in original]

Yet, while experimental research addressing potential and as-yet nonexistent biological threats represents a promising site of capital investment, its efficacy in increasing, rather than undercutting, the security of "social, biological, and environmental reproduction" seems questionable. The biological research arm of the Pentagon, Cooper notes,

"finds itself in the paradoxical situation of having first to create novel infectious agents or more virulent forms of existing pathogens in order to then engineer a cure" (91).

While *The Host* satirizes a similar scenario in which the possibility of a virulent biological agent leads to the intervention of state military and, subsequently, international forces, Bong's disease researchers do not "create" so much as they imagine and invent their emergent virus. In a chilling scene, Gang-du overhears an U.S. scientist confiding to his translator that the U.S. sergeant who had been in contact with the creature was not infected after all but rather died from shock during his operation. Through a strange twist of logic that, as Tony Rayns suggests, resonates with the Bush administration's search for "weapons of mass destruction" (Bong, "Audio Commentary"), the doctor insists that, since "so far, there is no virus whatsoever," the virus must reside in Gang-du's head. Assisted by a team of Korean physicians, he then proceeds to violently probe Gang-du's brain for the virus. After superimposing a mysterious virus onto his monster movie plot, Bong leaves his viewers with an outbreak narrative without a virus. In the absence of a sensationalized biological threat to be dealt with by Western scientists in lab suits, we are forced to look elsewhere for virulent threats to biological well-being. In the following section, I will suggest that the dismantling of various means of social reproduction—including environmental integrity, family stability, and food security—poses just such a threat throughout *The Host*.

[Go to page 3](#)





Gang-du's brain is probed for a virus  
that does not exist.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Belly of the beast: subsistence and reproduction



At the hospital, Gang-du eats a canned squid. This is one of several moments in which the film blurs or even inverts the distinction between the monster and the humans who pursue it.



Hyun-seo survives in the sewer where the creature regurgitates its victims.



"Social reproduction is the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life."—Cindi Katz

If biosecurity measures turn out to be the true perpetrators of “monstrosity” in Bong’s film, the mutant creature itself turns out to have interesting, almost sympathetic qualities. For despite the many resemblances it bears to the ravages of the U.S. military and the IMF, the monster is more than a simple allegory of such incursions. Commenting on the film’s climax in an interview, Bong confides,

“When Gang-du...takes the pipe and strikes the monster in the mouth, I had a close-up of Gang-du and his face goes from rage to pity, as if he is thinking, ‘You’re sort of in the same situation as I am in.’ It wasn’t something that came as an accident. It was something that the actor and I discussed, that at this moment we should show some pity for the monster” (Bong, “The Han River”).

In other words, Bong seems to have deliberately encoded into the film a notion of identification:

“Audiences taking in a monster story aren’t horrified by the creature’s otherness, but by its uncanny resemblance to ourselves” (Newitz 2).

But in what ways can the creature and the humans it attacks be said to be “in the same situation”? Through a series of parallels, the film associates the creature not only with the devastating effects of toxic dumping, structural adjustment, and international intervention on South Korea’s environment and economy, but also with basic subsistence activities necessary for the reproduction of life. At this creaturely level, the film’s monster or “creature” turns out to have quite a bit in common with those who are pursuing it.

If the creature turns out not to be a carrier of disease, it does play host to the two children, Hyun-seo and Se-ju, through much of the film. Bong has noted that, strictly speaking, this is “a kidnapping movie” structured by Hyun-seo’s captivity (“Han River Horror Show”). But the creature’s intentions for the children remain a mystery. Why does it swallow and regurgitate, without killing, each of the children during the course of the film? Why does it grab Hyun-seo with its tail as she is in the act of escaping, only to gently lower her to the floor? This may be explained as a simple plot necessity: the girl must be kidnapped and not killed so that her family can have a reason to escape from the hospital and hunt the

Hyun-seo looking after Se-ju in the sewer.



When Hyun-seo attempts to escape, the creature tenderly restrains her.



Se-ju and his older friend take what they need after breaking into Gang-du's family's food stand.



Bong's quirky, often incompetent heroes mourn the apparent death of Hyun-seo.

monster. Why, then, would Bong introduce a second child into captivity, instead of stopping with Hyun-seo? Se-ju's role in the film suggests that there is more than accident—or even plot exigencies—behind the children's survival.

Se-ju's appearance introduces one of the film's most noticeably digressive subplots. We first glimpse Se-ju and his older brother as they are hiding from Gang-du and his family during the family's search for the monster. Without explanation, the camera follows the brothers as they proceed away from the film's primary action to Gang-du's food stand in the quarantine zone. As they ransack the abandoned shop for food, Se-ju's brother explains that they are not stealing, but engaging in something "like melon *seo-ri* at a farm." As they leave the food stand, the brother explains that *seo-ri* is

"an old borrowing game kids play. So *seo-ri* is a right of the hungry." [9] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

This definition abstracts from the rural "borrowing game" played by hungry children to a generalized and potentially revolutionary "right of the hungry" to appropriate or redistribute food. Ironically, immediately after this hungry street kid mentions *seo-ri*, the monster, exercising its own "right of the hungry," swoops down and swallows both brothers. When it regurgitates them in its sewer hideout, only Se-ju comes out alive.

The juxtaposition of the boys' and the creature's practices of urban foraging raises further questions about the monster's motives. Does it represent the monstrous threat posed by a "right of the hungry," or does the theme of *seo-ri* humanize the monster, which is just trying to satisfy its hunger? Does the creature's habit of depositing undigested (and in some cases still living) bodies in its hideout represent a tendency to hoard that violates the ethics of *seo-ri*, or does it demonstrate the creature's self-control in consuming no more than it needs? Such questions are further complicated when Gang-du's father, in order to excuse his son's apparent incompetence, explains that his son had been often neglected as a child:

"And this poor boy with no mother...he must have been so hungry. Going around, doing *seo-ri* all the time. Raising himself on organic farms. Whenever he got caught, he'd get beaten up."

While Gang-du's anomie has made his character universally appealing to independent film audiences worldwide, this scene critically contextualizes it by tracing its social and historical causes. Motherless, malnourished and often sustaining blows to the head, Gang-du himself regularly practiced *seo-ri* to stay alive. He, too, seems intimately connected with the monster.

Interestingly, the description of Gang-du as a "poor boy with no mother" could easily apply to most of the film's major characters: Gang-du, his siblings, his daughter, and the two orphans subsisting in the sewers. There are no mothers in the film, and if (as Bong has suggested) "this weak family is in the middle of everything and the focus of the film," then the film is primarily concerned with the effects of the absence of



maternal support (Bong, “Exclusive”). Early in the film, we learn that Hyun-seo’s mother has abandoned her husband and daughter:

“It’s been 13 years since she popped out the baby and ran off. In a word, her birth was an accident....”

The only creature in the film that pops out children and runs off is the monster: it swallows them alive, then delivers them to its lair through its intricate, fleshy mouth, which resembles a vulva. In the words of one reviewer, Bong’s monster sports “a mouth that’s a Freudian nightmare” (Burr). The monster is implicitly compared with a mother, too, when (not yet having learned that Hyun-seo is still alive) Gang-du’s father vows,

“Until I slit that beast’s stomach and at least find Hyun-seo’s body, I’ll never leave this world in peace.”

In this context, the creature appears to be an externalization of a model of motherhood gone awry—of the shortcomings of a “weak family” that fails to provide for social reproduction. In his groundbreaking study of *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, Kyung Hyun Kim attributes the absence or marginalization of mothers in contemporary South Korean films to the country’s rapid industrialization:

“Frenzied postwar urbanization had seriously altered familial relations to a point where ‘mothers,’ in their traditionally represented form, gradually disappeared from contemporary-milieu films” (6).

The monster’s maternal features thus reaffirm the connection to the IMF bailout I discussed earlier. Post-1997 neoliberal reforms led to social instability and rising rates of “emigration, family desertion, and divorce” (Bello), as well as a process of creating a “casual” or “flexible” of labor force with effects that are, according to Harvey, “particularly deleterious for women” and therefore corrosive to households and families (112).[10]

On one level, then, fighting the monster is a way of punishing the “bad mother”—an externalization of the distressed functions of biological and social reproduction. As Barbara Creed has argued in a sweeping analysis of “the monstrous-feminine” in horror films,

“when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive function” (7).

From this viewpoint, battling the creature misogynistically compensates for anxieties about masculinity embodied by characters like the incompetent Gang-du, his unemployed alcoholic brother, and their father—a patriarch who dies after literally drawing a blank when attempting to shoot the creature with an empty shotgun. These crises of masculinity, in turn, register anxieties about economic failure (unemployment, families lacking support, the emigration of women and their employment in the informal economy). This reiterates a broader pattern of gender relations that Kim has observed in recent Korean films:



The creature swallows one of its early victims.



The creature’s mouth flares open, trying to ingest Hyun-seo and Se-ju.



Swallowed by the creature, Se-ju and Hyun-seo are nevertheless kept intact. Gang-du pulls the two children’s bodies out of the mouth in a scene that resembles childbirth.





Masculinity is reasserted with a vengeance when Gang-du impales the creature.



After it is assaulted, shot, and lit on fire by Molotov cocktails and a flaming arrow, the camera takes an interest in what the creature sees.



Immediately following the shot of the creature's eye, we see this blurry shot of the water that promises relief.

“Through the relegation of the political crisis onto the body of a woman, the male subjectivities in a modern environment are born. The disfiguration of the woman covers up their incompetence and instability” (274).

When Gang-du finally kills the creature by impaling its suggestively shaped mouth on a stick, the threat of undisciplined and excessively mobile motherhood is put down in no uncertain terms. Indeed, the climactic battle seems excessive, as the “weak” family, after recovering Hyun-seo’s dead body from the monster’s mouth, joins together in vindictively beating, shooting, burning, and impaling the mother-like creature, failing in their rage to register that the girl could just as easily have been killed by her exposure to a massive dose of Agent Yellow while the creature was carrying her. Gang-du’s myopically vindictive focus on the monster as the cause of Hyun-seo’s death effectively blinds him to the risks posed by Agent Yellow and international interventions in the name of public health. It also blinds him to the common capacities to feel hunger, pain, and hope that the creature shares with its human enemies and spectators. The film’s audience, by contrast, is invited to consider just these commonalities by two adjacent shots during the battle scene. First, there is a close shot of the creature’s eye, already pierced by an flaming arrow shot by Gang-du’s sister. Next, there’s a cut to the river, which the creature, half engulfed in flames, is presumably looking at in the hope that the water will extinguish the fire. This creature’s-eye-view of the Han River inverts the relation between the film’s protagonists and its “monster” at the very moment when the creature is defeated, again raising questions about where the blame for Seoul’s sufferings really lies.

Whereas the battle with the monster seems excessively brutal, and (given the creature’s correspondences with Gang-du and the practice of *seo-ri*) even senseless in its violent reassertion of manhood, the film’s final scene offers an alternative resolution to the nation’s broken families and ruptured social fabric. Gang-du fixes dinner for a sleeping boy, whom we recognize as Se-ju, the child befriended by Hyun-seo in the creature’s hideout shortly before her death. Their shared meal echoes the film’s only other scene of domestic harmony—a brief interlude in which Gang-du’s entire family (Hyun-seo, still trapped in the sewer, makes a fictive or hallucinatory appearance) eats a simple meal together in their food stand, shortly before his father is killed by the creature. There are two substitutions at work in the film’s concluding meal: the obvious substitution of Se-ju for Gang-du’s lost daughter, and Gang-du’s own transformation from a narcoleptic slacker into a responsible parent. Running the food stand, looking out the window for signs of monsters, and also performing traditionally feminized domestic labor, Gang-du is inhabiting the roles of both his own dead father and the boy’s absent mother.

The “weak family” at the center of the film has been expanded and strengthened through an act of adoption—an act that is particularly significant given the cultural stigma<sup>[11]</sup> attached to domestic, single-parent adoption among many South Koreans, and in light of the effects of Korea’s liberal transnational adoption policy upon the country’s population, gender relations, and social wage. As Eleana Kim writes,



Gang-du performs reproductive labor, preparing a meal for Se-ju and himself.



Gang-du, his siblings, and their father share a basic meal in the family food stand, shortly before their father is killed while attacking the creature. This meal is echoed by the film's final scene, when Gang-du and Se-ju share a meal at the same table.



Se-ju requests that the U.S. news broadcast on TV be turned off so that he and Gang-du can concentrate on their meal together.

“Adoptees and social activists in South Korea have criticized the state's continued reliance on international adoption as a social welfare policy solution...and its complicity in the perpetuation of gendered inequalities. Birth mothers—often working-class women, teen mothers, abandoned single mothers, sex workers, and victims of rape—represent the most subordinated groups in an entrenched patriarchy and misogynistic state welfare system...” (76).[12]

If the neoliberal economic depredations that are embodied in the “host” have created prime conditions (such as financial, familial, and institutional instability) for the production of both real and “paper” orphans[13], then Gang-du’s adoption of Se-ju enacts a defiance of those conditions and a refusal to allow the child to either starve or be adopted internationally. As in its initial formaldehyde-dumping scene, the film’s conclusion is also grounded in recent history. Just before *The Host* was released, the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare announced that, in order to bolster domestic adoptions, it would allow and offer financial support for adoption by single-parent households (Park).

*The Host* thus concludes with a mundane yet unconventional act of adoption that to some extent restores Gang-du’s and Se-ju’s lost family ties. As an alternative to the vindictive assault on the creature in previous scenes, this quiet epilogue asserts that reproductive labor—cooking, housework, and child-rearing—plays an important role in the maintenance of life. Although Bong’s film—like so many recent Korean films—suffers from a palpable absence of maternal characters, its ending gestures towards progressive domestic conditions that, according to Seungsook Moon, would be necessary for the reformation of South Korea’s masculinized public sphere:

“As long as the domestic identities of women as mothers/wives/daughters-in-law mediate women’s citizenship, women’s access to civil society is practically and ideologically hampered.... [Q]uotidian practices of housework, childrearing and extended family obligation primarily performed by women overshadow their citizenship rights that formal law is supposed to guarantee” (138).

The spectacle of Gang-du and Se-ju sitting down to a home-cooked meal with the television turned off (the first meal we see that does not consist of processed foods like canned octopus or instant noodles) also offers an alternative picture of “bio-security”: social ties and reproductive work that require the support of the state. For the risk factors that are at once named and misrepresented by the designation “biohazard” would be diminished by a more equitable distribution of the means of social reproduction: health care, welfare, and social services, access to food, and an environment supportive of life.[14] Even this warm scene of virtual adoption, however, is ambivalent insofar as it depicts Gang-du performing household labor and raising the child alone, with no apparent help from the state or the outside world as the camera pans out to reveal the food stand alone in a snowy field.





Gang-du tenderly tucks in Se-ju, whom he seems to have taken in as a substitute for his own lost daughter.



This AP photograph by Ahn Young-joon depicts protestors in 2008 appropriating the biohazard suit to dramatize the dangers posed by mad cow disease, which Korean demonstrators widely associated with U.S. beef imports. Here, the protestor on the right is cleaning the person in the U.S. "Uncle-Sam"-style cow mask with a vacuum cleaner.

In his influential report on Ebola, “Crisis in the Hot Zone” (1992), Richard Preston cites head of the National Institutes of Health, Stephen Morse, describing a scenario wherein an emerging disease could wipe out humankind. Morse explains that the genetic diversity of the population would prevent a virus from extinguishing the species, but

“if one in three people on earth were killed—something like the Black Death in the Middle Ages—the breakdown of social organization could be just as deadly, almost a species-threatening event” (81).

“Social organization”—which involves social reproduction as well as political and economic stability—turns out to be more vital than any emerging biological threat. For this reason, Ulrich Beck warns that neoliberalism’s approach to managing “risk” is perilous in its evacuation of public institutions designed to support social reproduction and civil society. “There is no security,” he argues, “without the state and public service” (Beck 12).

In its diegetic vacillations between monster plot, outbreak narrative, and a few mundane scenes of cooking, eating, and *seo-ri*, *The Host* incisively criticizes the interconnected phenomena of economic neoliberalism and biosecurity. Whether the monster ultimately allegorizes toxic dumping, U.S. military occupation, the IMF, or the CDC, its assault on the weakened, motherless family abandoned by the state dramatizes the devastating effects of all these phenomena on South Korean social reproduction.

Less than two years after *The Host* was first released, the vital issues of biosecurity and food safety resurfaced in massive demonstrations in Seoul and other cities. The issue in May and June of 2008 was President Lee Myung-bak’s promise to George Bush to resume U.S. beef imports, which had been banned since 2003 and which Koreans widely associate with BSE, or mad cow disease. Charles Armstrong reports that by June, there were

“almost nightly candlelit protests in the centre of Seoul and other cities, estimated to have mobilized over a million Koreans” (116).

Many of these demonstrators were

“women who were extremely upset that in years to come their children might pay with their lives for President Lee’s kowtowing to US export interests” (Hudson).

Demonstrators expressed their concerns that mad cow disease might not have been purged from U.S. cattle, noting that

“mad cow disease can remain dormant for decades in humans who have eaten tainted meat” (Hudson).

In a striking rhetorical inversion of the outbreak narrative, South Koreans represented the U.S. as a source of contagion and scientifically-produced emergent risks. In this instance, biosecurity measures were

invoked to shore up national sovereignty rather than to undermine it, and also to criticize the economic policies of President Lee. While beef imports were the most proximate cause of the demonstrations, protests also spread to encompass larger issues such as “rising fuel prices[,] large-scale privatizations, rising education costs, [and] attacks on labour rights” during the first months of Lee’s presidency (Armstrong 116). Despite their differences from the monster attacks dramatized in *The Host*, these recent protests demonstrate the extent to which the outbreak narrative is intertwined with issues of national identity, economic independence, political sovereignty, and everyday practices of social reproduction.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

Thanks to Martha Lincoln, Suzie Park, Mark Jerng, Charles Wharram, Edlie Wong, Shameem Black, Joseph Jeon, Joseph Heumann, David Leiwei Li, Sangita Gopal, and audiences at Eastern Illinois University and the University of Oregon for generously commenting on earlier versions of this essay.

[1] In “Globalisation and New Korean Cinema,” Shin argues that this hybridizing deployment of Hollywood conventions and other international genres is characteristic of contemporary South Korean cinema, and that this enables the films to respond critically to both national and transnational issues:

“These hybrid cultural forms provide an important means for... self-definition, a self-definition that not only distances itself from a xenophobic and moralizing adherence to local cultural ‘tradition’ but also challenges Western cultural hegemony” (57).[\[return to page 1 of essay\]](#)

[2] Although the exchange about dusty bottles seems far-fetched, Bong notes in an interview that it was based on McFarland’s “real” reason for having the formaldehyde dumped (Bong, “Audio Commentary”).

[3] A longer account of the suicide that has been edited out of the film directly adduces the victim’s bankruptcy and exorbitant credit card debt as motives for his death (Bong, “Deleted News Clips”).

[4] David Harvey provides a useful historical account of economic neoliberalization in South Korea, arguing that it did not create new wealth so much as it unevenly redistributed already existing wealth (106-12). Naomi Klein describes the IMF interventions in South Korea as a prominent example of how “disaster capitalism” forcibly privatizes public and state resources in the wake of (in this case economic) crisis (263-80). See also Bruce Cumings, “The Korean Crisis and the End of ‘Late’ Development.”

[5] Bong notes that the biohazard “costumes” and equipment that appear in the fabricated news clips are of the sort that “you can see in a movie like *Outbreak*” (“Audio Commentary”).[\[return to page 2 of essay\]](#)

[6] In *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*, Melinda Cooper notes that “Using the technique of DNA shuffling (hailed as the second generation of genetic engineering because of its highly accelerated capacity for randomly recombining whole segments of genomes), DARPA [the

Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] is attempting not only to perfect our defenses against existing threats but more ambitiously to create antibiotics and vaccines against infectious diseases *that have not yet even emerged*" (91).

[7] See Mayer's analysis of "virus discourse" in the contemporary genre of the "biothriller," Dougherty on the "killer virus novel," and Wald's on the "outbreak narrative." Mayer points out that, as a discourse organizing national security, the virus reflects an ambivalence towards the "versatility" of global economic relations:

"The virus, which may work its way from species to species through contaminated secretions or excretions and which is capable of changing the genetic material it comes into contact with, attests to a protean versatility that is further emphasized once the ambivalent nature of the pathogen—between life and death—comes into view. This ambivalence turns the virus into a perfect trope to envision contemporary world-political developments and interactions" (7).

On *Jaws* as an anticipatory narrative of public reactions to AIDS, see Selden, "Just When You Thought it was Safe to Go Back in the Water...."

[8a] Given the immense popularity of "Korean Wave" (*hallyu*) films such as Bong's throughout the Asia Pacific, the film's references to SARS and resonances with Western anxieties about "Chinese" lead toxicity expand the scope of its critique of outbreak narratives to encompass other Asian populations and products that have been stigmatized as "risky."

[8] While the name of this chemical substance clearly echoes the herbicide Agent Orange, it also invokes the yellow dust from the Gobi desert that has on several occasions brought carcinogenic pollutants from China's industrial cities into Seoul.

[9] Bong elaborates further, saying that *seo-ri* is

"different from shoplifting or any kind of robbery—it's some kind of playing, game, it's some kind of rural culture of Korea: young boys in the night invade a fruit field or some place and take some fruit or sometimes even chickens.... It's some kind of culture of the lower class people..." (Bong, "Audio Commentary"). [[return to page 3 of essay](#)]

The theme of *seo-ri* is present from the film's first shot of Gang-du: he has fallen asleep while working at the snack booth, and a boy (Se-ju, as it turns out) attempts but fails to steal a piece of candy.

[10] The *chaebol*, state-led economic system that came to an end with the economic crisis and IMF bailout also relied on extended "familial" ties between salaried workers and their employers.

"By cloaking the demands of profit in the guise of older Confucian

practices, labor itself gets recoded as the work of the family and by extension of the nation” (Jeon).

[11] “In South Korea, adoption is still not viewed as a socially acceptable alternative method of extending one’s family or parenting a child” (Sarri, Baik, and Bombyk 100).

[12] Sarri, Baik, and Bombyk provide a comprehensive analysis of the detrimental effects of transnational adoption on South Korea’s welfare system and social programs for children and single mothers.

[13] “An eleven-year decline in transnational South Korean adoption was reversed with the IMF crisis, which caused a concomitant crisis of overflowing orphanages. In 1996, approximately five thousand children were placed in state care, and that figure was projected to be double in 1998, leading the Ministry of Health and Welfare to announce that it ‘has no choice but to make changes to recent policy which sought to restrict the number of children adopted overseas’” (Kim 64).

[14] Social reproduction, Katz writes,

“hinges upon the biological reproduction of the labor force, both generationally and on a daily basis, through the acquisition and distribution of the means of existence, including food, shelter, clothing, and health care” (710).

Along with cultural and political-economic issues, Katz includes environmental harm as a factor in social reproduction: in both environmental racism and migrant labor patterns,

“there is a rejigging of the geography of social reproduction so that the costs of social reproduction—in once case environmental and in the other political-economic—are borne away from where most of the benefits accrue” (714).

## Works cited

Anonymous. “Editorial: Are Koreans Disposable People?” *Korea Times* (July 17, 2000).

<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-63489933.html>.

Accessed on 4/20/2008.

Armstrong, Charles. “Contesting the Peninsula.” *New Left Review* 51 (May June 2008): 115-35.

Beck, Ulrich. “The Silence of Words and Political Dynamics in the World Risk Society.” Trans. Elena Mancini. *Logos* 1:4 (Fall 2002): 1-18.

Bello, Walden. “All Fall Down.” *Foreign Policy in Focus* (July 3, 2007).

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/4429>.

Accessed on 4/20/2008.

Bong Joon-ho. "Audio Commentary." *The Host: Collector's Edition*. New York: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2007.

-----, "Deleted News Clips." *The Host: Collector's Edition*. New York: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2007.

-----, "Exclusive: *The Host's* Bong Joon-ho." Interview with Edward Douglas. March 6, 2007.

<http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=19126>.

Accessed on 4/20/2008.

-----, "The Han River Horror Show: An Interview with Bong Joon-ho." Interview with Kevin B. Lee. Trans. Ina Park and Mina Park. *Cineaste* 32:2 (Spring 2007).

<http://www.cineaste.com/articles/an-interview-with-bong-joon-ho.htm/>.

Accessed on 4/20/2008.

-----, "The Host—Bong Joon-Ho Q & A." *Time Out New York* (Nov 7, 2006).

<http://www.timeout.com/film/newyork/news/1514/the-host-bong-joon-ho-q-a.html>.

Accessed on 4/21/2008.

Burr, Ty. "A Monster Movie for the 21st Century." *Boston.com* (9 Mar 2007).

<<http://www.boston.com/movies/display?display=movie&id=9483>>.

Accessed 15 Aug 2008.

Chomthongdi, Jacques-Chai. "The IMF's Asian Legacy." *Focus on Trade* (September 2000).

<http://www.globalpolicy.org/socecon/bwi-wto/imf/2000/asiafc.htm/>

Accessed on 4/20/2008.

Cooper, Melinda. *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2008.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Crotty, James and Kang-Kook Lee. "The Effects of Neoliberal 'Reforms' on the Post-Crisis Korean Economy." *Review of Radical Political Economics* 38:4 (Fall 2006): 669-75.

Cumings, Bruce. "The Korean Crisis and the End of 'Late' Development." *New Left Review* 231 (Sept-Oct 1998): 43-72.

Dargis, Manohla. "It Came From the River, Hungry for Humans (Burp)." *New York Times* (9 Mar 2007).

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/movies/o9host.html>>.

Accessed 15 Aug 2008.



Davis, Mike. *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu*. New York: New Press, 2005.

Dougherty, Stephen. "The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel." *Cultural Critique* 48 (Spring 2001): 1-29.

Esposito, Roberto. "The Immunization Paradigm." Timothy Campbell, trans. *diacritics* 36:2 (Summer 2006): 23-48.

Farmer, Paul. "Social Inequalities and Emerging Infectious Diseases." *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 2:4 (Oct-Dec 1996), 259-69.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007.

Hill, Logan. "Three Steps: The New York Film Festival." *New York Magazine*. 1 Oct 2006.

<<http://nymag.com/movies/filmfestivals/21981/>>.  
Accessed 15 Aug 2008.

Hudson, Gavin. "Mad Cow Disease Fears Spark Mass Demonstrations in South Korea." *Ecoworldly.com* (8 May 2008).

<<http://ecoworldly.com/2008/05/08/mad-cow-disease-fears-cause-mass-demonstrations-in-south-korea/>>.

Accessed 15 Aug 2008.

Jeon, Joseph. "Residual Selves: Trauma and Forgetting in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*." Forthcoming in *positions: east asia cultures critique*.

Katz, Cindi. "Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction." *Antipode* 33:4 (2001): 709-28.

Kim, Eleana. "Wedding Citizenship and Culture: Korean Adoptees and the Global Family of Korea." *Social Text* 21:1 (2003): 57-81.

Kim, Kyung Hyun. *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.

King, Nicholas B. "Security, Disease, Commerce: Ideologies of Postcolonial Global Health." *Social Studies of Science* 32:5-6 (October-December 2002): 763-89

Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007.

Kumar, Amitava. "Introduction." In *World Bank Literature*, xvii-xxxiii. Ed. Amitava Kumar. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.

Mayer, Ruth. "Virus Discourse: The Rhetoric of Threat and Terrorism in the Biothriller." *Cultural Critique* 66 (2007): 1-20.

Moon, Seungsook. "Women and Civil Society in South Korea." In *Korean*

*Society: Civil Society, Democracy, and the State*, 121-43. Second Edition. Ed. Charles K Armstrong. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Newitz, Annalee. *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.

Park Chung-a. "Singles Can Adopt Children." *Korea Times* (July 18, 2006).  
<http://times.hankooki.com/lpage/200607/kt2006071817382810160.htm>.  
Accessed on 10/29/2006.

Persaud, Natasha. "U.S. Base Expansion in Korea Sparks Protests." *Socialism and Liberation* (August 2006).  
<http://socialismandliberation.org/mag/index.php?aid=663>.  
Accessed 4/20/2008.

Preston, Richard. "Crisis in the Hot Zone." *New Yorker* (26 October 1991): 58-81.

Sarri, Rosemary C., Yenoak Baik and Marti Bombyk. "Goal Displacement and Dependency in South Korean-United States Intercountry Adoption." *Children and Youth Services Review* 20:2-1 (1998) 87-114.

Selden, Daniel. "Just When You Thought it Was Safe to Go Back in the Water..." In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 221-6. Ed. Henry von Abelow, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Shin, Jeeyoung. "Globalisation and New Korean Cinema." In *New Korean Cinema*, 51-62. Ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005.

Slavin, Eric. "South Korea Shelves Pollution Issue, Accepts 15 U.S. Sites." *Stars and Stripes* (July 17, 2006).  
<http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=37754&archive=true>.  
Accessed 4/20/2008.

Wald, Priscilla. "Future Perfect: Grammar, Genes, and Geography." *New Literary History* 31(2000): 681-708.

Wilson, Rob. "Killer Capitalism on the Pacific Rim: Theorizing Major and Minor Modes of the Korean Global." *Boundary 2* 34:1 (2007): 115-33.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).

Images from *Ghosts*



The killer



The female protagonist as final survivor



A servant seeing Zhang Aiqiu and her boyfriend off.

## Horror returns to Chinese cinema: an aesthetic of restraint and the space of horror

by [Li Zeng](#)

While martial arts blockbusters are still the big box office winner, the horror film has certainly become a new cinematic attraction in Mainland China. At the turn of the millennium, the horror genre, which had been absent from PRC (People's Republic of China) cinema for over forty years, has enjoyed a sudden revival.[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Following Liu Xiaoguang's four horror films, *The Mirror* (Gu jing guai tan, 2000), *Cameraman* (Shan ling xiong meng, 2001), *Ghosts* (Xiong zhai you ling, 2002), *The Game of Killing* (Tian hei qing bi yan, 2004), more filmmakers ventured into this sensitive field. The year of 2005 saw a conspicuous number of horror and thriller films, including

- *Suffocation* (Zhi xi, dir. Zhang Bingjian),
- *Ghost Inside* (Yi shen yi gui, dir. Qiu Litao),
- *Seven Nights* (Qi ye, dir. zhang qian), and
- *The Curse of Lola* (Zu zou, dir. Li Hong).

The government's strict grip over cinematic content and visual representation and the lack of a ratings system largely accounts for the horror genre's long absence from Mainland China. In censors' eyes, the graphic representation of violence, usually associated with this genre, may pollute young people's minds; horror's dark overtones conflict with the upbeat spirit of constructing a nation; and the subject matter of ghosts and supernatural elements promotes superstition. [2] The revival of the horror genre raises a series of questions: How could the horror films avoid censorship? Why has the horror genre suddenly gained popularity in the PRC? Did PRC horror films imitate internationally recognized Asian horror films or Hollywood ones? Are there any shared styles and themes in PRC horror films?

The essay addresses these questions as I describe the revival of the PRC horror genre and its predominant stylistic characteristics and themes. Discussing the relation between horror and national cultures, Peter Hutchings sees horror cinema as part of a film culture produced within a particular national context; the films themselves address specifically national issues and concerns; furthermore, while sharing certain generic codes and conventions, national horror films also differ in significant ways.[3] Hutchings' concept offers a dynamic way to view PRC horror films. In that vein, I hope to demonstrate that the PRC horror revival arises as an outcome of the commercialization of cinema in China and the popularity of foreign horror imports. In addition, in both theme and style, current PRC horror films have been shaped by and felt the impact of censorship and social/cultural transformations taking place since the early 1990s.

## Commercialization of cinema in the PRC and the horror revival



*Ghosts ends with the servant smiling.*

Although we can argue that film genres are “the result of the material conditions of commercial filmmaking,”[4] I agree with Schatz that genre consciousness is an essential feature of commercial cinema. Thus the revival of the horror genre in the PRC primarily resulted from the film industry’s commercialization following a national decline in cinema attendance and competition from big blockbuster imports.[5] Before the 1990s, Chinese films were typically characterized according to their subject matter, among which the most common types included “films of rural themes, of urban themes, of war, and of historical figures/events.”[6]

The horror genre revival began at the beginning of the twenty-first century but its antecedents can be traced to the early 1980s, when the state first affirmed film’s entertainment function. Although the government still used film as an ideological tool for education and propaganda, its recognition of film as an appropriate cultural form for entertainment significantly created room for filmmakers to explore a diversity of themes and genres, including thriller and horror. Only a few horror films were made at that time, among the most popular of which were

*Images from The Game of Killing*



*At the film's end, Jingwen feels someone in her apartment.*

- *The Head in the House* (Xiong zhai meiren tou, dir. Hu Qingshi and Liu Yichuan, 1988) and
- *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion* (Hei lou gu hun, dir. Mu Deyuan and Liang Ming, 1989).

In addition, horror elements commonly played a role in detective thrillers, such as

- *The Foggy City* (Wu du mang mang, dir. Zhang bo and Wang Ying, 1980),
- *Mysterious Buddha* (Shenmi de da fu, dir. Zhang Huaxun, 1980),
- *Murder in 405* (405 mousha an, dir. Shen Yaoting, 1980), and
- *The Case of the Silver Snake* (Yinshe mousha an, dir. Li Shaohong, 1988).

These films included scenes that use dark shadows, low-key lighting, eerie music, and shock close-ups to evoke horror. The interest in horror did not carry on into the 1990s, but a few notable horror films were made then, such as

- *The Mystery of St. Paul Hospital* (Shengbaoluo yiyuan zhimi, dir. Mi Jiashan, 1990) and
- *The Foggy House* (Wu zhai, dir. Huang Jianzhong, 1994).

The detective thrillers and these few horror films are precursors to the revival of the horror genre.



*A point of view shot shows a woman in white standing by the window.*

In the 1990s, the government was determined to develop cinema's market potential and took measures to enhance the process of commercializing the film industry. For example, in 1994 the MRFT (Ministry of Radio, Film and Television) established an annual importation of ten international blockbusters, which to some degree regenerated the PRC film market, getting people back to the cinema. The following year, the MRFT relaxed its production licensing policy, extending the right to produce feature films from state-run studios to provincial-level studios. In 1998, the policy of licensing allowed private companies to apply for film production and distribution permits on a case-by-case basis.[7] Now most of the recent horror films are produced or financed by private culture-industry companies. For instance, *The Game of Killing* is





The woman turns towards Jingwen or the camera and reveals herself as Jingwen. The film ends.



A long shot of Li Jia's "ghost" in *The Game of Killing*



The "ghost" in *Email*

produced and distributed by Stellar Megamedia; *Suffocation* is produced by Chinese Media Development Co. Ltd; and *The Door* is produced by The Rosat Film & TV Production Company and Stellar Megamedia.

An open market for imports and a series of new policies stimulated domestic competition and encouraged film's shift from an ideological tool to an entertainment medium oriented towards a commercial market. Starting from the late 1990s, popular genre films have become the staple of PRC cinema. Even fifth generation filmmakers, who have been associated with art cinema, have turned to making commercial films, typified by Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (2005).

Comedy, martial arts, and urban romance melodrama have been the most popular genres. Currently, a conspicuous production of horror films indicates this genre's increasing popularity. Despite its problematic status, the horror genre tantalizes Chinese filmmakers and private investors for its market potential. In the PRC horror films are rarely imported for public exhibition, but pirated DVD markets and underground cinemas have made foreign horror films accessible to horror fans. The pirate market has a noticeable role in popularizing the horror genre. Moreover, Asian horror films, particularly those from Japan, South Korea, and more recently from Hong Kong, have gained international success. Such films include

- *Ringu* (1998),
- *Audition* (2000),
- *Dark Water* (2002),
- *Grudge* (2003),
- *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), and
- *The Eye* (2002).

For example, I watched the Japanese *Ringu* in an underground theater in Guangzhou in 1999. It was such a sensation that almost everyone was talking about this film. It is clear to me that the popularity of Asian horror films could stimulate both Chinese filmmakers and private investors.

I think its relatively low production cost has also contributed to the revival of the horror genre. There are numerous precedents of low budget horror films gaining massive profits, with films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *Ringu*. Low budgets also allow for testing the boundaries of censorship with a relatively low financial risk. For filmmakers who want to break into a film market dominated by big productions (particularly martial arts films), the horror genre can be a promising choice.

## Style: imitation and an aesthetic of restraint

As the horror genre was absent from PRC cinema for so long, it is understandable that contemporary Chinese horror films borrow from and imitate internationally successful Hollywood and Asian horror films. Take, for example, Liu Xiaoguang's *Ghosts*. The film starts with a group of young interns setting up a temporary hospital at an old house, which is used as a local church. There is a rumor circulating among the villagers about ghosts killing people at



*Email*: The entrepreneur is unaware that the “ghost” is going to take revenge against him.



The “Ghost” in *Ghost Inside*



In *The Door*, Jiang Zhongtian watches his neighbors through a telescope.



*The Door*: A point of view shot of

night. The interns at first laugh at the rumor. Then strange and horrible things happen. The young people are cruelly murdered one by one, except Zhang Aiqiu, the female lead, and her boyfriend. The killer wears a mask (white face with a scarlet red mouth in shape of a grim smile) and a black cloak, and kills with a cleaver. It turns out the murders are committed by the priest to eliminate those who refuse to follow his “religion.”

*Ghosts* resembles *Scream*: a group of playful young people as victims, a cold-blooded killer wearing an impersonal and implacable mask, incessant killing, and a woman as the final survivor. Like many Hollywood horror films that refuse the closure of horror by providing an ambiguous ending (like *Halloween* and *The Exorcist*), which implies the monster's return, *Ghosts* ends similarly. After the heinous priest dies, Zhang Aiqiu and her boyfriend decide to leave. Seeing them off, a servant closes the door. The film then ends with a medium close-up shot of the servant smiling mysteriously, accompanied by gloomy music. The ending casts a doubt whether or not evil was eliminated and evokes the dread of horror's return.

*The Game of Killing* has a similar ending. A group of criminals steal a miniature gold coffin, a national treasure, from an ancient tomb. On their way out, the tomb collapses. Jingwen's best friend is left behind buried. Then the members of the group die mysteriously, except Jingwen, who is grieving for her friend's death and regrets her participation in the crime. Before the criminals die, they all receive a strange phone call and see the ghost of Jingwen's friend. As the only survivor, Jingwen returns the gold coffin to the government. In the last scene, Jingwen enters her apartment with some flowers, singing in a happy mood. Suddenly, eerie music rises, evoking uneasiness and implying danger. From Jingwen's point of view, the camera pans from the living room to the bedroom and reveals a woman with long straight hair, dressed in white, standing by the window. The camera slowly zooms in as she turns around towards Jingwen. Surprisingly, the woman turns out to be Jingwen herself. Then the film ends, leaving the audience to resolve the new plot questions: Is her friend's ghost Jingwen's illusion? Have the mysterious deaths really taken place or are they Jingwen's delusion?

An obvious imitation of Japanese horror is the image of the female ghost or a ghost like woman, dressed in white, with face covered by long straight hair, based on Sadako in *Ringu*. Such an image of a female ghost or a ghost-like woman has become a frequently used cinematic representation in contemporary PRC horror films. In addition to Li Jia in *The Game of Killing*, other examples include *Seven Night*, *The Matrimony*, *Ghost Inside*, and *Email*.

Nevertheless, although Chinese horror films borrow foreign conventions, not all of them are simply copies. Li Shaohong dedicates *The Door* to Hitchcock, straightforward about the great master's influence. Like *Vertigo*, the film is about a man's obsession with a woman, which leads to her death. The reference to *Rear Window* is obvious in the scene in which the male protagonist stands in the street, watching his apartment building through a telescope. A wide-angle shot shows people's activities in their apartments. However, *The Door* creatively uses the male protagonist's point of view, his voice-over narration, a fragmented



what's happening in the apartments  
recalls similar scenes in *Rear Window*.

### Images from *Seven Nights*



The protagonist looks into the mirror...



...and sees a "ghost".



But the mother-in-law and maid find  
nothing strange.

narrative structure, and mix of flashbacks and dreams to blur distinctions between illusion and reality, and it gives a poetic sentimentality to the horror of murder. The film achieves its own distinguished style, independent of its source of inspiration.

PRC horror films differ from Hollywood horror films primarily in the degree of visually represented violence. Hollywood horror films are "often accused of visual excess: of showing too much, too often." [8] In contrast, due to strict censorship, the PRC horror films share a restraint in their visual depiction of horror. An increasing commercialization of the film industry has not changed the censorship system much. The state continues to exercise control over film production. And, as many filmmakers and critics have pointed out, the biggest problem with film censorship is that "nobody is clear about the criteria for the censorship." [9] A film has to be ideologically and culturally acceptable, with the standard of what is an acceptable cultural and political theme "shifting with the direction and force of the political winds." [10]

A number of films by sixth generation directors have been prohibited from public screening because of their thematic focus on marginalized people, the dark side of reality, and an explicit visual representation of sexuality. For example, Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* (2006) was censored due to its reference to the June Fourth Event and its sex scenes. Lou Ye received a penalty of five years suspension from making films. Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* (2007) encountered a similar fate. The film had fought a long way to pass the censorship and then was shown in China only for a short period even after a 22-minute cut of sexual scenes. After that, the Film Bureau banned this film and prohibited Fang Li, the producer, from engaging in film-related work for two years. These cases are considered warnings to filmmakers who attempt to touch upon sensitive subjects.

"The Provisions on the Filing of Film Scripts (Abstracts) and Administration of Films," passed in 2006, reflect the government's control over film production even though it has given the latter more flexibility than before. Some regulations are specifically addressed to the horror genre. According to the provisions, the following contents must be cut or altered:

"Showing content about murder, violence, terror, ghosts and the supernatural; ...showing specific details of criminal behavior;... showing content which evokes excitement from murder, bloodiness, violence, drug abuse and gambling; ...containing excessively horror scenes, dialogues, background music and sound effects." [11]

These regulations, particularly the last one, set up substantial restrictions for horror films. In this way, the PRC horror film has been shaped by both confrontation and negotiation between commercial cinema's priorities and state control. Common features shared by PRC horror films are that they deal with ideologically correct themes and present violence and horror with visual and aural restraint. I refer to such a formula as an "aesthetic of restraint."

An aesthetic of restraint can also be found in the earlier horror films. *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion*, a revenge ghost film, reveals at the end that the murder and revenge scenes and the ghost are all made up. *The Mystery of St. Paul Hospital*, a detective thriller/horror about serial murders, interweaves the murder case with the plotline of the Liberation Army's fight against Nationalist remnants' conspiracy to destroy New China. The film's script thus praises the wisdom of military representatives who solve the murder case and maintain national security and social order.

Less propagandistic than the earlier thriller/horror films, contemporary horror



In *The Door*, the image of the dead body does not evoke horror.

films still follow this overriding aesthetic of restraint. The ghost usually turns out to be either human, as in *Ghosts*, *Seven Nights*, and *Email*, or simply an apparition, as in *Ghost Inside*, *The Door*, and *Help*. The horror films emphasize atmospheric fear and psychological suspense more than explicit visual and aural representations of violence and bloodiness. The typical visual stylistic moves found in these horror film includes expressionless faces in extreme low-key lighting; distorted figures in fisheye shots; long shots of empty corridors; sudden pan shots revealing the source of horror from a character's point of view; hand-held-camera tracking shots of a character walking towards a source of impending danger; and a camera moving up on a character from behind. Aural representations usually include a creepy sound of walking on wooden stairs, a woman's cry or scream in darkness, and scary music to build up the suspense and tension.

To avoid "excessiveness," these films do not contain long sequences of horror. Take a scene in *Seven Nights* as an example. The female protagonist combs her hair in the bathroom. She looks into the mirror, and suddenly sees a woman in a green gown, with her face partially covered by her long straight hair. She calls for her mother-in-law and the maid, but they see nothing strange. Then it takes another ten minutes to get to a similar scene. The rather long interval between horror scenes reduces emotional excessiveness. This film creates suspense and horror mainly through lighting and the narrative of a dark family secret — the murder of a young woman by her mother and brother.

Most films avoid scenes showing murder. We see people die, but not the action of killing. For instance, in Li Shaohong's *The Door*, we never see how the protagonist murders his girlfriend. When we finally see her body, which he has kept in a closet sealed behind a wall, the image of the body does not evoke horror at all. Wrapped in a clean transparent plastic bag, she is smiling peacefully as if she were sleeping. In some films, such as *Help* and *Ghost Inside*, no real murder or death takes place. In *Help*, a medical student with symptoms of hysteria believes that she has killed her boyfriend with the aid of her supervisor. She is haunted by nightmares and by her boyfriend's ghost. The ending reveals that most of the scenes are her hallucination.

*Ghosts* is an exception in terms of having an excessive representation of horror. However, this film passed the censorship largely due to its ideological message that caters to the government. Although not as gory as *Scream*, *Ghosts* includes explicit display of bloodiness and violence. It shows the actions of the murderer chopping the victims to death. Thus it is probably the first domestically produced horror film that shows the details of violent killing. To illustrate its visual representation of violence, I will note the actions that take place in the basement murder scene. Here, one more rational character does not believe in the rumor about ghosts killing people and intends to dissect the corpse of a so-called ghost, which was captured by the priest. Suddenly, the murderer appears. No time to escape, the first character lies down on a table and covers himself with a piece of white cloth. The killer, holding a cleaver, walks around the room to search for him among the corpses. Seemingly losing patience, the killer cuts the corpses randomly. The long shot of the killer's search and approaching to the victim intensifies suspense and terror. As the scene is not shot from the victim's point of view, the viewer does not know where the victim hides. Thus, there is a sense of helplessness in waiting for the murder. A low angle shot of the killer standing in front of a covered body cuts to a close-up shot of the exposed victim, who can do nothing but wait to be killed. After the murder takes place, a close-up shot shows the killer holding the cleaver dripping with blood.

Images from *Ghosts*



The killer searches for the victim.





The killer cuts the corpses randomly.



A low angle shot of the killer standing in front of a covered body...



... cuts to a close-up shot of the exposed victim.



After the murder takes place, a close-up shot shows the killer holding the cleaver dripping with blood.

*Ghosts* avoided censorship thanks to an unintended correlation between the film and the massive propaganda campaigns against Falun Gong, a “cultivation practice” that is banned by the Chinese government. *Ghosts* can be viewed as an anti-Falun Gong film. The priest manipulates people’s fear of supernatural spirits and presents himself as a god-like figure who has power to command natural forces and protect people from evil ghosts. To make people believe in the existence of ghosts, he commits multiple murders to create fear among the villagers. The portrayal of the priest character fits the government’s criticism of Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong. An online review on *Ghosts* criticizes the film’s poor aesthetic quality, but points out its reference to Li Hongzhi. [12] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Thus, it is possible that the audience recognized the resemblance.

In an interview, Liu Xiaoguang explained that he got the idea for the film from a news report on an African heretic practice. He had not expected that his film would be completed and released the same time as the national propaganda campaign against Falun Gong.

“At first I was worried that the film could not pass the censorship, but, perhaps because of this reason [the film could be used as a propaganda against Falun Gong], the film gained approval quite easily. Almost no alteration was required.”[13]

His words suggest that green light could be given to excessive horror films if they could be used as a propaganda tool to promote the state’s ideology. Nevertheless, most of the PRC horror films still choose a restrained style.



A close-up shot of the priest as a monster



The low angle close-up of the priest highlights his monstrosity.



The priest shows his power over the people.

[Go to page 2](#)

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *The Door*



*The Door* is set in the city of Chong Qing, a city characterized by its fast modernization.



Hong Yuan is practicing golf, a game popular among the new rich class, against a big window wall.



An aerial shot of the location of Hong Yuan's home.

## Urban themes and the architectural space of horror

Discussing the meaning of the horror genre, Andrew Tudor proposes that rather than asking the question, “Why Horror?” we should ask, “Why do these people like this horror in this place at this particular time.”[14] This question directs our attention to cultural meanings of horror. Chinese horror films, though restricted in their visual and aural effects to create horror, are significant expressions and reflections of contemporary social and cultural concerns. The earlier thrillers/horrors in the 1940s and 50s are usually set in old mansions, houses, or graveyards. Such a setting creates a distance between the audience and the horror. Most of the recent horror films use contemporary urban cities as the site of horror. Familiar settings and urban themes offer a direct and immediate experience for the urban audience, the primary consumer of the horror genre. I will focus on three films, *The Door*, *Ghost Inside*, and *Email* to discuss the construction of horrifying urban space in contemporary horror films.

Li Shaohong, director of *The Door*, is an acclaimed fifth-generation filmmaker. She is internationally recognized for her art films, such as *Bloody Morning* (1992) and *Blush* (1995). *The Door* can be seen as another example of the fifth-generation's shift from art house to commercial cinema. But Li's choice of the horror genre is not a surprise. In her earlier career, she made *The Case of the Silver Snake* (1988), a thriller that had good box office success but was later banned from public screening because of its visual representation of violence. *The Door* was her return to one of her early interests.[15] In China, her name is often linked to the television serial dramas, *Palace of Desire* (Da ming gong ci) and *Oranges Have Turned Red* (Juzi hong le). In her work, she combines artistic appeal, popular taste, and social and psychological themes. This feature is evident in *The Door*, which uses horror to penetrate into an individual's psyche, disturbed and traumatized by China's social and economic transformations.

*The Door* is a sympathetic depiction of a young intellectual whose paranoia and inability to cope with the changing society turns him into an insane murderer. The film starts with Jiang Zhongtian's murder of his girlfriend Wenxin. His motives are revealed through his interior monologues, dreams, and delusions. Jiang suspects Wenxin is having an affair with Hong Yuan, his old buddy who joined the new rich class during China's economic transformation. He also suspects that Li Zuowen raped Wenxin although she denies it. When Wenxin cannot stand Jiang's over-protection and suspicion and decides to break up with him, Jiang kills her and hides her body in his apartment.

Li Shaohong situates the deadly romance horror in Chong Qing, a city characterized by its fast modernization. The urban environment is portrayed as a stratified space where winners and losers of the economic transformation encounter each other and clash. Jiang's suspicion of Wenxin's affair with Hong Yuan is largely due to his unbalanced attitude towards Hong Yuan's success. In high school, Jiang was the center of attention and his buddies, including Hong Yuan, looked up to him. However, during China's massive economic transformation, Hong Yuan became a successful entrepreneur, whereas Jiang has been an employee at a publishing company, which went into bankruptcy and was sold to Hong Yuan.





Hong Yuan as the center of a cheering crowd.



Hong Yuan brags about his success.

Hong's executive office, luxurious house, and private villa are displays of his superior position. In the first scene, Jiang goes to see Hong about his job. As he enters Hong's office, a POV long-shot shows Hong practicing golf, a game popular among the new rich class, framed against a big wall of picture windows, through which we see a fast intercity train passing by. Hong is immediately associated with open urban space, the speed of modern transportation, and a privileged lifestyle. Jiang's interior monologue reveals his disdain for or jealousy of Hong's newly-achieved upper-class status.

In the following scene, Hong invites his friends, including Jiang and Wenxin, to his new house, located in the most expensive area of the city. Aerial shots and long shots highlight the spectacular and glamour of the façade, garden, and swimming pool. Jiang feels like a stranger, isolated from his friends. He projects his sense of loss and failure onto Wenxin and blames her for forcing him to come and then leaving him alone. Wenxin is a victim of Jiang's wounded masculinity. He knows that Hong loves Wenxin and fears that Hong will win her over. By killing Wenxin and keeping her body in his apartment, Jiang becomes the permanent owner of Wenxin, the winner of the love competition between him and Hong.

Jiang's delusion about killing Hong at his villa is a reflection of his repressed hatred towards Hong. In a dream/fantasy sequence, Wenxin calls Jiang and asks him to meet her at a place called "Mountainside Villas." After going through some terrifying experiences, he finally gets to a ghostly place. He passes several newly built villas before reaching a building under construction. Thick fog, bats hovering under the low sky, and cats' screams cast a horrifying, ominous, and decadent atmosphere over the villas. Jiang enters a luxuriously furnished room, hearing Wenxin's laughter. When Hong Yuan comes to greet him, Jiang stabs him to death. In fact, Hong Yuan is murdered at his office by his business rivals. Jiang's delusion of being the killer is his repressed desire to get rid of Hong. As the villa is another icon of the rich, the displacement of the site of murder can be read as Jiang's disdain and hatred of social and economic stratification, and also as his symbolic elimination of the physical evidence of his failure.

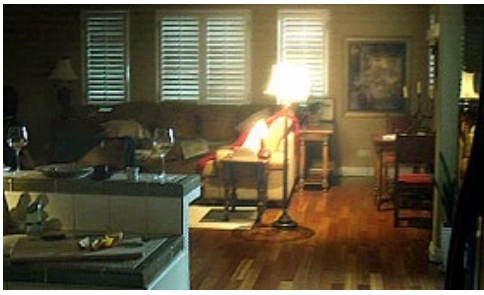
Jiang is shown wandering in the street against a background of spectacular buildings and department stores and trains traveling among high rises. The mobility of people in urban space stands out, and that whole milieu seems indifferent to Jiang, who is absorbed in his own little world of loss, frustration, and paranoia. Public space seems threatened by Li Zuowen's appearance, whom Jiang suspects raped Wenxin. The rape incident has been torturing Jiang and Li Zuowen's sudden appearance forces him to face his failure to protect his girlfriend's "purity." He repeatedly says that the world is full of danger and he has to protect Wenxin. His solution is to kill her and keep her body forever in the apartment, perhaps the only place where Jiang feels he belongs and in control.



Jiang Zhongtian feels isolated from his friends.



Thick fog, bats hovering under the low sky, and cats' scream cast a horrifying, ominous, and decadent atmosphere over the villas.



Jiang enters Hong Yuan's house.



Jiang imagines killing Hong Yuan.

The film builds up a mood of looming danger by portraying the apartment as a place where peace and terror coexist. Jiang is shown decorating the apartment to make it a nice home for him and Wenxin, but at the end we see that he is actually covering over the built-in closet where he hides Wenxin's body. The apartment looks cozy and peaceful in daytime but becomes a mysterious, claustrophobic, and terrifying place at night. Jiang lives in paranoia about his surroundings, suspicious of his neighbors. He always looks through the peephole before opening the door, and in these moments his paranoia is emphasized by fisheye shots, which distort the corridor and the person standing outside the door.

In U.S. horror films, an apartment is frequently used as the site of murder, symbolizing a displaced anxiety related to sexual frustration or the repressed trauma. The apartment in contemporary Chinese horror films carries different meanings. Since the housing reform in the late 1990s, the apartment has become an essential part of urban citizens' lives. Instead of living in the units assigned by the companies they work for, people have to buy their own apartments. On the one hand, shifting from collective property to private property, the living space gains complete privacy; on the other hand, it becomes an isolated place separable from a communal environment. Unlike in the past when neighbors were colleagues and reciprocal visits were common, now the apartments have double safety doors, closed to neighbors, who are strangers.



Jiang is decorating the apartment to make it a nice home for him and Wenxin.



The apartment looks mysterious and claustrophobic in the darkness.



Jiang always looks through the peephole before opening the door.



Fisheye shots distort the corridor and the person standing outside the door.

The apartment has become an important setting in contemporary films and television serial dramas. Stories about what takes place behind the closed doors are popular. For example, *Don't Talk to Strangers* (Buyao he moshengren shuohua, 2001), a high-rating television serial drama, explores the theme of domestic violence and presents the apartment as a place of isolation, violence,





The mise-en-scene emphasizes the space of the apartment.



Tracking shots create an impression that someone is following or secretly watching the protagonist.



Tilted shots and lighting from below turn the apartment into a horrible place.

and paranoia. Contemporary horror films, like *The Door*, which locate the murder plot in the apartment, reflect uneasiness towards isolated private space in extreme ways.

Other films that have similar representations of apartment include *Suffocation*, *Help*, and *Ghost Inside*. In *Suffocation*, the male protagonist kills or fantasizes that he has killed his wife in their apartment. Like Jiang Zhongtian, he is suspicious of his neighbors and always looks out through the peephole. Similar fisheye shots are frequently used to give a distorted view. In *Help*, the female protagonist suffers a delusion of killing her boyfriend in their apartment and feels haunted by his ghost.

In *Ghost Inside*, the protagonist escapes her husband's violence and moves into another apartment with her six-year-old daughter. A neighbor tells her that the former tenant killed her daughter and then committed suicide in there in order to prevent her ex-husband from taking the daughter away. The protagonist begins to see an apparition of the former tenant, who tries to persuade her to do the same thing. She becomes increasingly hysterical and paranoid. At the end of the film, she is barely stopped by the police when she tries to kill her daughter. *Ghost Inside* has a similar plot to *Dark Water*, but a big difference is that the apparition in *Ghost Inside* is the protagonist's delusion whereas *Dark Water* depicts a real ghost. Although no murder takes place in the apartment, *Ghost Inside* effectively uses lighting, mise-en-scene, and camera angles that turn it into a ghostly, nightmarish, and claustrophobic place.

The shift of the site of horror from old mansions and graveyards in earlier horror films to the urban environment and apartment in contemporary horror films gives the latter a realistic look.[16]. This effective use of an urban setting reflects the psychological effect of social and economic changes on Chinese urban citizens. Aaron Smuts posits two types of haunting in haunted house films: "those in which the house is haunted by ghosts that do the haunting," and "those in which the house itself is the source of the haunting." [17]. However, the haunted apartment in PRC horror films does not fit into either category. There are no real ghosts that inhabit the apartment, and the apartment itself is not the source of the haunting. Rather, the source of the haunting comes from the inhabitants, who displace their anxiety about social and economic transformations onto architectural space.

The claustrophobic apartments in the horror films are not shabby in appearance. Instead, the decoration and layout of the apartment suggest good taste and modern design. In *Suffocation*, for example, the interior of the protagonist's apartment is a conspicuous display of the living style of the new bourgeois class. In some sense, contemporary Chinese horror is a bourgeois horror, for the entertainment of young urban viewers, the primary target audience for the horror genre.



An old building is the setting of *The Mystery of St. Paul Hospital*.



An old building is also the setting of *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion*.



In *Suffocation* tracking shots are usually used to reveal the decoration and design of the apartment ...



...and to follow a character's movement.

If urban space represents moral degradation and individual's isolation, the village in the PRC horror genre represents innocence, purity, and genuine love. Such contrasting spaces are represented in *Email*. In that film, a successful entrepreneur lives a wanton life, having sexual relations with different women. He begins to receive emails from his first girlfriend whom he deeply loved in the 1970s. The emails describe the happy times when they were together. He later finds out that the girlfriend has actually been dead for one year. Many strange things happen in his office building, where he and others see a female ghost. In the end, it turns out that the emails have been written by a young woman, who was raped by the entrepreneur and intends to take revenge. She reads his girlfriend's memoir and copies messages from it. Her revenge is not fulfilled, but the entrepreneur becomes insane, waiting for the ghost of his true love to return. *Email* shows a contrast between simple and pure love in the 1970s and the corruption and moral degradation in contemporary society. The entrepreneur's lover's voice-over reading of the letters is visualized by scenes of the young couple walking by a river near a village and exchanging loving looks. These scenes present a lyric picture of the past and rural life, evoking a nostalgic sentiment towards the old days before the massive economic transformation took place.



In *The Door*, Jiang Zhongtian is choosing wallpaper for his apartment.



In *Email*, The entrepreneur's lover's voice-over reading of the letters is visualized by scenes of the young couple walking by a river near a village.

## Conclusion

Understanding the revival of the PRC horror genre means seeing it within the context of the film industry's commercialization, state censorship, and widespread social and economic transformation. Producers of the genre have formulated an aesthetic of restraint as a result of the confrontation and negotiation between commercial filmmaking and government censorship. While it is still a question whether or not the revival of the horror genre in the PRC is a positive outcome of the cinema's commercialization, the horror films themselves provide a unique perspective on contemporary culture and society. In particular, they call our attention to an important question: Why does this fast developing urban space suddenly become the site of horror? I think Tony Williams is right when he says that the monstrous nature of horror "reflects that of the society which produced it." [18] The horror genre is a powerful form, due to its excess, for reminding us of the anxieties and problems brought about by social and

economic changes, which have tremendously impacted our everyday life and living spaces.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



The ending of *Email* evokes nostalgia for the days before China's economic transformation.

### Notes

1. The horror genre existed before the Communist Party founded the PRC. Ma-Xu Weibang's *Song at Midnight* (Ye ban ge sheng, 1937), a Chinese version of *Phantom of Opera*, was a big success. The same director made a few more horror/thrill films, including *Walking Corpse in an Old House* (Gu wu xing shi ji, 1938), *The Lonely Soul* (Leng yue shi hun, 1938), and *Song at Midnight II* (1941). [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. There are other countries that do not have the horror genre, such as Egypt and former Soviet Union. Ideological reasons usually account for the absence of horror films from national cinemas in the first place. See Josephine Woll, "Exorcising the Devil: Russian Cinema and Horror," and Viola Shafi, "Egypt: A Cinema without Horror?" in *Horror International*, eds. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).
3. Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (Manchester, U.K. and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993). Also see Andrew Wills, "The Spanish Horror Film as Subversive Texts: Eldy De La Iglesia's LA Semana Del Asesino," in *Horror International*. Wills' study of the Spanish horror film is a good application of Hutchings' notion.
4. Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genre: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981), 16.
5. Genre films existed before the founding of the PRC, when the film industry was commercialized. See Shuyu Kong, "Genre Film, Media Corporations, and the Commercialisation of the Chinese Film Industry: The Case of 'New Year Comedies,'" *Asian Studies Review*, Vol.31 Issue 3 (September 2007): 227-242.
6. Zhu Ying, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 160.
7. Ibid., 149.
8. Dennis Giles, "Conditions of Pleasure in Horror Cinema," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Metuchen, N.J., and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984), 41.



9. Li Yinghe, “dianying shengcha zhidu de deshi”  
[http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_473d5336010002ru.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_473d5336010002ru.html)  
(July 22, 2008)
10. Zhu, 91.
11. “SARFT Reiterates Film Censor Criteria,”  
<http://info.hktdc.com/alert/cba-e0804c-2.htm>  
(July 1, 2008).
12. See the review at  
[http://ent.163.com/edit/020718/020718\\_126895.html](http://ent.163.com/edit/020718/020718_126895.html)  
(December 22, 2008).[\[return to page 2 of essay\]](#)
13. Xie Xiao and Wu Jieming, “Cong kongbupian shongshen zhi lu  
toushi zhongguo dianying fenji” (Viewing Chinese film rating in  
relation to the censorship of the horror film), *Nanfang Daily* March 17,  
2004.  
[http://fun.hsw.cn/2004-03/17/content\\_903585.htm](http://fun.hsw.cn/2004-03/17/content_903585.htm)  
(retrieved December 22, 2008)
14. Andre Tudor, “Why Horror?” in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken  
Gelder (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 54.
15. “Interview with Li Shaohong,” see  
<http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2007-01-09/ba1403175.shtml>  
(December 29, 2008)
16. U.S. horror films also went through the shift from the foreign  
location as the site of horror in the 1930s to the U.S. family in the late  
1960s. See Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror  
Film,” in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry  
Keith Grant (Metuchen, N.J., and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.,  
1984), 183-185.
17. Aaron Smuts, “Haunting the House from Within: Disbelief  
Mitigation and Spatial Experience,” in *Dark Thoughts: Philosophic  
Reflections on Cinematic Horror*, eds. Steven Jay Schneider and  
Daniel Shaw (Lanham, Maryland and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press,  
Inc., 2003), 166.
18. Tony Williams, “Family Horror,” *Movie* 27/28 (1980): 117.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# Cross-cultural disgust: some problems in the analysis of contemporary horror cinema

by Chuck Kleinhans

## Part one: notes on cross-cultural disgust

### Introduction

This essay<sup>[1]</sup>[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) explores some key issues surrounding the status of contemporary horror films and their critical analysis. I speak tentatively rather than exhaustively and authoritatively because I am still working with the ideas, but also because I see the creative and critical field as in process, changing, and contingent. In the past two issues of *Jump Cut* (JC 49 and 50) as well as this one, we ran a group of articles on horror films.<sup>[2]</sup> The essays arrived independently but when published together showed a new sophistication and complexity in discussing the genre and its political implications. I was also aware of new critical writing on horror, books and articles, and the vogue for East Asian horror (and new Hollywood adaptations of these films to a Euro-North American market and sensibility). For the *Jump Cut* section in issue 49, I contributed an analysis of Fruit Chan's Hong Kong film *Dumplings*<sup>[3]</sup>, which began with my fascination with Chan's body of work and an admiration for this particular film as a political allegory of contemporary transnational capitalism. The film involves eating dumplings made of fetuses as a rejuvenating treatment. When I finished the article, I realized that I had many notes about additional issues to deal with, such as the fetus images, abortion, cannibalism, and disgust in relation to horror, but these seemed to wander off from focusing on the film. This essay returns to those issues. Usually I try to write and like to read carefully organized and crafted essays that develop a systematic argument. That's all well and good; it helps readers understand and critique my efforts, and it forces me to clarify what I think. But I intend this piece to be different. I want it to be more exploratory.

Cross cultural analysis is important, especially in a time when many people invoke "globalization" as a slogan without thinking through the contradictions and complications of the term and the concept. Globalization, or more accurately, neo-imperialism can only be adequately understood by analyzing power, especially the power differential between those who introduce, control, and change things, and those who have to adapt to that process. Here I want to explore some of those issues in a way

that hopefully can indicate the complexity involved. I also think that horror as a moving image genre is changing (once again) and the conceptual machinery to understand it is also in flux. It is a fluid field at the moment, and I want to do some justice to that and respect it. And related, the newly developing discussion of the senses and emotions in media analysis, in my specific case here, disgust and abjection, needs space to develop.

I don't think I have all the answers, but I think I have some idea of what the key questions are that we have to ask to get to another level of analysis. So, what I'll try to do is provide a path or trail, but one which allows for sidetracks, scenic overviews, rest stops, and curious detours, and probably a few dead ends. This is a first installment in a series considering these issues.

## 1: Taste across cultures

"Cultural exchange starts with misunderstanding. We are not afraid of misunderstanding."

—Tatsumi Hijikata, founder of Bhutto art[4]

An apocryphal story: A wealthy Western couple enters an Asian restaurant (somewhere in Asia, or in Chinatown, etc.) with their pet dog. Seated, they ask the waiter to feed the dog a meal in the kitchen while they dine. After dinner they want to retrieve the pet only to find out they have just eaten it.

The joke relies on the known East/West cultural difference that in some Asian cultures eating dog is accepted, while in the West it is prohibited by custom, if not law. The story can be told with slightly different spins: a communications confusion (mutual, or a translation problem by the waiter); a matter of class and cultural ignorance (and a joke on the couple); the subaltern's revenge; etc.

I've found that discussions which touch on these cultural differences are sometimes awkward between Asians and Westerners, or resolved only with humorous remarks at best and denial at worst. Typically, East Asians know that dog meat is available and consumed in some venues in China, South Korea, and the Philippines; yet they also know that this is considered disgusting by most Western people who tend to think of dogs as companion animals.[5] Yet there are Asian films which deal with the topic, such as *Dog Food* (Azucena, d. Carlos Siguion-Reyna, Philippines, 1999) which depicts the friendship of a dog-meat vendor and a teen female dog-lover. Recently I wrote an analysis of Korean director Kim Ki-duk's *Address Unknown* (2001), which prominently features a dog butcher in its allegorical depiction of Korean society which touches on some of these issues.[6]



The dog butcher negotiates with a small town restaurant owner, c. 1970  
South Korea in *Address Unknown*.

Recently my home state of Illinois passed legislation, after lobbying by horse lovers, to end the slaughter of horses for meat (for human consumption or animal feed) at the one remaining U.S. slaughterhouse that handles horses (the meat was usually shipped overseas or turned into dogfood). Yet, in France horsemeat is common, with its own specialty butcher shops. And in the 70s and 80s it was quite common to find horsemeat in some of the Latino groceries in my Northwest side Chicago neighborhood. (Not identified as such, at least to Anglos, but the fat-free flesh, bright red color, and taste was a dead give-away).



Parisian *chevaline* (horsemeat butcher shop)



I've had conversations with Asians and Asian-American immigrants who deny that dogs are eaten in their home country, while allowing it does happen in other countries. Talking about this with a colleague from Karachi, Pakistan, he said it was common lore in his city that whenever a ship from China docked in the port, dogs seemed to disappear. A web search easily turns up examples of tourists blogging about finding dog meat served in Taipei, Beijing, or Seoul, usually after a bit of a search. I've had people from those same places also tell me that indeed it is eaten in their nation of origin, often with a wry acknowledgement that knowing this shocks most Westerners. And I've also had other people from those same places declare it never happens, it is outlawed, it was a custom in the distant past, it might occur in backward rural areas but not in cities, etc.

## 2: Images: seen and unseen

One of my basic points about shocking images is that everyone draws the line differently and even in their own history changes with experience, emotional, and intellectual development. As someone who has worked my whole adult life with image material I have the capacity to be detached, for the most part, from images that would be alarming or repulsive or disgusting to many others. That I can accept, but there is a second effect which is judging in my own writing about these issues with how much to show, knowing that some actual or potential readers will simply not want to see these images.

Intellectually, I would argue that you couldn't understand an image unless you see it. A prose description does not suffice. But this article contains three sets of images that I know many would find very disturbing. The first is a set of three Internet images of a Chinese woman killing a kitten with her high heel shoes. The first two images set up the scene: attractive young woman holding a kitten. The third one shows the spike of a heel crushing the animal's head, face on. The very first image was published in some Western newspapers. Obviously editors found one innocuous image enough to accompany the story. (Typically, newspaper editors self-censor on the basis that their paper may be brought into the home or school and thus readily seen by children.) The third image, crushing the skull, was found on the Internet where editorial standards are relaxed to nearly non-existent. The second set of images covers the rape/murder of a waitress in the Hong Kong horror film, *The Untold Story*, and the third set depicts the murder of a family: parents and children in the same film.

One way of thinking of this is to use conventional and commonplace categories to ask if an image is "gratuitous" or "justified." Gratuitous images presumably don't need to be there; they go beyond what is needed to tell the story, dramatize the scene, explain what is happening. Yet behind that commonsense assumption is the idea that action and character are more important than spectacle, showing. It's the old Aristotelian aesthetics. Similarly, to argue from the idea that an image is "justified" by the topic or the author's intent, is to assume that there is a good reason, and that usually means a "higher" reason for an image: one justified as "art," or "historical importance," or "educational purpose," or some such explanation.

In writing my article on *Dumplings*, I was quite sure that the explicit images of abortion and cutting up dead fetuses for food were necessary: the film's social/political statement, its allegory, justified the means. In discussing the rape/murder and the murder of children in *The Untold Story* (detailed later in this essay) I also thought that

the images I chose were necessary to have a clear understanding of the film's tenor. I chose not to include what I consider even more disgusting shots that appear in the film because while they pass by very quickly in the film (that is they are clearly readable, but immediately superceded), as framegrabs online, they linger and the image becomes more disturbing when one can view it in isolation and at length. But I also know that what I have shown here is too much for some readers. I want to respect that, since this essay explores that very question of the relativity of disgust. So, I'll revert to the now-commonplace label used on unrated DVDs in the U.S. as well as in broadcast and cable television: "Viewer Discretion Is Advised," or "May Not Be Suitable For Younger or More Sensitive Viewers." You'll have to open the images in a separate window with an extra mouse click.

On the Internet we can witness Western attitudes to Asian treatment of domestic animals: for example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) shows a clandestine video that claims to document a Chinese dog and cat fur market.[7] And Beijing has a wild animal park which includes live feeding: visitors can purchase a chicken to toss to the lions. In 2006 Chinese authorities were reported as intensively investigating an Internet video that purported to show a young woman crushing a kitten to death with her high heel shoes.[8]

#### Internet-circulated images of Chinese kitten killer





[\[Click here to view final image of killing kitten.\]](#)

For exotic eccentricity, the (London) *Times* carries a story, “China’s penis restaurant,” on an upscale Beijing place that offers the male organ (yak, water buffalo, goat, dog, bull) as well as more mundane terrapin leg and chicken feet.[9] While these examples play into Western Orientalist beliefs about cruelty and exoticism in East Asia, it also reveals a more fundamental knowledge that cultures in fact do draw boundaries differently, including in behavior and cuisine.

This is a kind of practical knowledge that one finds within modern mixed societies without reading anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss on the raw and the cooked or Mary Douglas on purity and pollution. In my upbringing within the clan, on the German side blood sausage and on the Swedish side lutefisk[10] provoked amused discussions especially in front of the children. As an adult, some seafood I’ve been offered (e.g., sea cucumber), and some organ meats (brains) seemed beyond my own comfort zone.[11] In Sandinista Nicaragua, stopping at a roadside restaurant, my host asked what meat was on the menu for the mid-day meal, and was told that only cow’s udder was available. He shook his head, seeing this as sad evidence of the effect of the U.S. embargo and U.S. sponsored Contra war on ordinary life. We had rice, beans, and tortillas instead.

In English, the term *disgust* stems from the sense of taste which is tied up with food and orality. As such it easily links to the experience of horror via the emotion of fear. This is perhaps most easily demonstrated with the example of the U.S. primetime TV show *Fear Factor* (2001-2006), which challenged contestants to accomplish various physical stunts such as bungee jumping and experiencing various creepy things (in a box with spiders, etc.). One of the favorite events on this show (which had a very high rating among children) had contestants eat something disgusting. A list of the “grossest stunts” on *Fear Factor* emphasizes those that involve ingestion and includes: a “pizza” of cow bile, coagulated blood paste, rancid cheese, topped with worms and fish eyes; buffalo testicles; large live spiders; cow eyeballs; horse rectum; worms; slugs. Such gross stunts are often the subject for jokes, as in the cable channel *E!’s* snarky TV clips show, *The Soup*, which recently highlighted an episode of the reality show *Man vs. Wild* which shows the host, wildlife adventurer “Bear” Grylls, manually searching through wild bear scat and demonstrating that large pieces of undigested

food in the waste can be washed off and then eaten. On the face of it, it seems everyone would agree this was disgusting. Except that obviously Grylls himself thinks it is acceptable behavior, seemingly offering the rationale that if you were lost and starving in the wilderness you could search ursine poop for edible sustenance. Survival wisdom becomes the excuse for bizarre and revolting behavior.

Celebrity chef/writer Anthony Bourdain has sampled cuisines around the world on his cable TV shows *A Cook's Tour* (Food Network) and *No Reservations* (The Travel Channel). While presenting himself as a Romantic hero adventurer, Bourdain tempers the imperial visitor to the exotic Other theme by self-mocking his persona and genuinely appreciating his hosts in their own terms. In one episode he meets tribal people in Namibia and goes on a hunt that ends in eating warthog rectum. Always the adventurer, Bourdain tries it, but reports it was very repulsive. At the same time, he clearly respects the local hunters as valiantly pursuing self-sufficiency in the face of an incredibly hard life.

The point being that the cultural difference always exists along a line of power differential. That cannot be erased, even by “going native;” however recognizing power difference as present prevents obscuring the implications. Of course the difference can be held up for ridicule or dismissal of the Other rather than just a fact of cultural variety. Specific examples always have to be assessed along an axis ranging from cultural relativism to cultural elitism and racism. While food anthropologists might be considered the most progressive in this regard, food journalists can manage the issue as well. Andrew Zimmern, host of *Bizarre Foods* (Travel Channel) eats his way around the globe highlighting the most unusual local dishes (such as worms and insects) which he enthusiastically consumes on camera. The emphasis is on his delight at finding curious cuisine and consuming it with gusto, rather than the “yuck” of *Fear Factor*.<sup>[12]</sup> But beyond the novelty of new cuisine, and educating one’s palate, lies a web of ethics and ideology. Taste isn’t simply in the mouth, it’s in the mind.

[Go to page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### 3: Terms and conditions

First of all, we need to set the terms. While “disgust” is usable and familiar, a more complex discussion has followed the psychoanalytically influenced term “abjection,” particularly in the wake of Julia Kristeva’s elaboration of the term in her analysis of horror. (I’ll return to these issues later.) But, noting that “disgust” is bound to the contingency of specific cultural settings (for example the term itself is not universally translated even in Indo-European languages), it may be useful to elaborate the concept outward to include relations to “distress,” “anxiety,” “fear,” loathing,” or other terms that express a disturbance that the text or media element at hand creates in a reader/spectator/audience. This is the familiar terrain in film studies of “body genres”—genres that evoke psychological/physical responses—such as melodrama (tears), low comedy (laughter), pornography (sexual excitement).

But, to start and plant a flag, disgust is a fact, something observable. Some parts of some media texts evoke or provoke a distaste, disturbance, or other kind of rejection by the audience. Artists know this and can employ it to artistic effect. But it is also readily seen that this response varies by individuals. Not everyone is repulsed in the same way or to the same extent by the same stimulus. So, we surmise that individual psychology and perhaps experience have something to do with it.

In terms of film, which is my main reference point here, we’ve all had the experience of ourselves being with others who found certain films or parts of them revolting, annoying, or obnoxious. Common conversations about the recent cinema often include mentions of this. A doesn’t like explicit violence, while B doesn’t seem to be bothered by it. C objects to a specific example in a specific film, but doesn’t share an aversion to a very similar sequence in another film. Are these just idiosyncratic variations? Part of the normal range of differences in art reception? Or is there something deeper going on? I think it needs more investigation, and I’d move from the microlevel of individual reaction to a much broader cultural scope and try to think about another observable phenomenon: horrible or disgusting images and narrative materials vary significantly by culture and tradition. Clearly, while “disgust” as an emotion may be universal in humankind, that is all humans have aversion reactions which are both physical and mental, what provokes disgust varies from culture to culture. It seems to be taught or developed by parents with infants and children, and within cultures it seems to be distinct by class, certainly, and it seems to be inflected by gender and other social variables. In a later episode of this article, I will propose a model for applying Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural taste or distinction in terms of cross cultural disgust. Here I mark out a tripartite analysis of disgust in response to media art: individual, cultural, and

“universal.”

Everyone has a distinct individual response based in their own personal psychology, experience, development, and exposure to the world. This response is fundamentally visceral, a bodily experience which combines perception, cognition, and emotion: in short, personality. But it is also historical and social in the broad sense of being informed by active and intellectual activity, including one's own morality and ethical standards. The cultural, historical, and eventful framework comes into play. This is the realm of sociologically and ideologically informed response, and everyone is subject to it. In this arena, “disgust” is a learned behavior following a culturally specific (and thus also culturally variable) response. Disgust is rooted in the body: first learned as a physical repulsion. But with the development of the body and the mind, disgust can also be provoked by images and experienced as emotional or even intellectual repulsion.

## 4: Abortion and cannibalism

Before writing my article on *Dumplings*, a film that includes abortion and cannibalism, Fruit Chan's films fascinated me. I appreciated their neo-realist style, combination of class and gender depictions, and dynamic narrative patterns. I had not seen *Dumplings* but while planning to teach a course on Hong Kong cinema, a grad student in my department, Evans Chan, brought me a copy from Hong Kong and urged me to show it as an example of contemporary horror. Actually, I chose to show a clip from the beginning of *The Untold Story* (aka *Human Pork Buns*) to illustrate Hong Kong Horror, and the entire feature indie film *Fu Bo*, which contains macabre material (discussed below). To represent Fruit Chan, I screened *Durian Durian* (2004), arguably his best film (with *Little Cheung* a close second).[13][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Viewing *Dumplings* for the first time, I realized I really couldn't easily teach it in a U.S. undergraduate classroom without extensive preparation. Some of the imagery and story elements were so disturbing that it would be better for the overall course design to simply make it available for optional viewing and to choose a less controversial film for classroom screening. However, not unexpectedly, a few students found *Fu Bo* disturbing with its theme and imagery of dead bodies in a mortuary.

The key reason why I decided against using *Dumplings* in the classroom was the anti-abortion movement's success at dominating the visual discourse of fetal images.[14] Since the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 which legalized first trimester abortion, abortion foes have used images of aborted fetuses in advertising and public demonstrations promoting their political agenda.[15] These have included large poster-sized images of bloody fetuses, purported fetuses, and “blood” covered baby dolls and animal fetuses.[16] The controversy surrounding the 2009 honoring of President Barack Obama at Notre Dame University's commencement re-ignited the activists and brought out the same visuals. For several days before the event a plane flew over the campus with a banner trailing behind showing a bloody fetal image, and protestors gathered off campus with the usual signs, baby dolls stained with red, etc.

With a complete awareness of the knee-jerk response of anti-abortion forces, a graduating Yale senior in 2008 said she intended to show an artwork in the graduating art student gallery show that was marked by the blood stains of a series of self-induced abortions. This produced the predictable outrage, scrambling by Yale administrators, and so forth, indicating if nothing else that the student, Aliza Shvarts, had a full understanding of the dynamics of the current art world and the ability to get attention and publicity by proposing something sensational.[17]

Abortion rights activists do not have a comparable set of dramatic images in the public arena. At best their literature offers “family planning” publicity images (depicting a heterosexual two generation nuclear family with a boy and girl) or college aged straight couples in affectionate poses implying birth control for the sexually active. Commercial contraception advertising follows the same general path. In the U.S. a dispassionate or clinical visual representation of abortion is simply not allowed in the public sphere.

The one allowable depiction of abortion from a “woman’s right to choose” position is the tragic frame. A powerful protest sculpture from the era before legal abortion, Edward Kienholz’s *The Illegal Operation* (1962) is a mixed media piece.



Gathered around a small tan knit rug, in shades of brown/yellow/ochre a metal luggage (or part of a supermarket shopping) trolley cart is outfitted with a chair, which is then covered in stained rag cloth and a torn pillow. Working in the artist’s typical

assemblage of junkyard items, the piece includes a worn and dirty hospital bedpan with unidentifiable detritus in the well, a white enameled kitchen saucepan, a standard metal bucket with bloody rags and a heavily rust red stained interior, and a floor reading lamp with the yellowed fabric shade placed askew allowing a harsh bare light bulb to dramatize the little scene. A low light brown wooden stool straddles the rug and the gallery space.

The empty setting implies human agents: the woman getting an abortion and the person performing the procedure: now absent, but not forgotten by any means.[18] The sculpture thus evokes the drama of the absent event, the forbidden performance, the indignity of its space. *The Illegal Operation* is deliberately confrontational and appalling. By underlining the unsafe, unsanitary and makeshift nature of “back alley abortions,” as they were called then, the installation eloquently cries out at the injustice of then-current law. [19]

## *If These Walls Could Talk –1952*

In a similar vein, the three part episodic film *If These Walls Could Talk* (HBO, 1996) dramatizes key issues in the abortion rights movement: “1952” depicts Demi Moore as a recently widowed nurse who is forced into an illegal abortion and who dies as a result. The story boldly argues for safe, available, and medically supervised procedures. “1974” presents Sissy Spacek as a mother of four who finds herself unexpectedly pregnant and must decide between giving birth or aborting. “1996” offers Anne Heche as an unmarried student who wants to terminate her pregnancy and is counseled by Cher, playing an MD and clinic supervisor who must offer compassionate concern for her patients while fending off disruptive anti-abortion protesters at her clinic.[20]

The 1952 episode melodramatizes the story of a nurse whose husband died six months earlier in the Korean War. In a moment of despair and grief at her widowhood, she had sex with her brother-in-law and became pregnant. Even though she has professional contacts and a job in medicine, she has no access to a safe and affordable abortion. Frustrated at every turn, she even attempts to self-abort with a knitting needle into the uterus, but without success. In desperation, she finally connects with a shady and cruel figure who performs a kitchen table operation without sanitary precautions and who leaves her to bleed out and die when things go wrong. Moore plays the character’s anxiety and despair with dramatic intensity and effect. (She co-produced the project as well.) As a didactic melodrama on a social problem, the short film makes its point: without legal, safe, affordable abortion, desperate women risked their dignity and lives to solve their problem pregnancy. But this drama and its final scene is the representational limit of showing abortion in the U.S.. Against the scare and horror imagery used by anti-abortion forces, the pro-abortion side can only present abortion as a tragedy with a sympathetic victimized woman, and the mother’s blood but not a fetus.





Claire Donnelly (Demi Moore) tries to self-induce an abortion using a knitting needle in her bathroom.



Camera moves in



She collapses as her sister-in-law arrives at the house, forcing Claire to confess her pregnancy. The sister-in-law is pitiless and angry.



With no safe, affordable, or legal options, her desperation increasing, Claire contacts a shady underground abortionist. He arrives at her house, declines to wash up before the procedure and places his instruments on the kitchen table. Claire asks if he isn't going to disinfect them and he snarls that he'll just leave. She acquiesces. The abortion begins on her kitchen table.



Claire winces and cries out during the procedure.



Done, the abortionist hastily leaves while the camera pulls back showing Claire on the table.



Severely hemorrhaging, Claire phones the hospital for help



But she collapses before being able to give her name and address.

[Go to page 3](#)

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### *Spacked Out*

In a stark contrast, the Hong Kong alienated youth film *Spacked Out* (d. Lawrence Ah Mon, 2000) treats abortion with a direct frankness. Shot in a casual neorealist style, four mildly delinquent young teen schoolgirls (with absent or inattentive parents) hang out and pal around. Their behavior ranges from shoplifting cosmetics and skipping school to hanging out in malls, having casual sex, and doing drugs. They make a little money by smuggling mobile phones across the border to the Mainland, posing for softcore pin-ups, and engaging in phone sex (during history class). The narrative center is Cookie, 13, who is pregnant from her first experience with a boy (who told her you can't get pregnant the first time, so there was no need for contraception). Abortions are easy to get in the city, her 16-year-old friend Banana says, apparently from experience. Her mother has run off and only phones her occasionally; her best girlfriend is now in reform school. With the other girls, she goes from her hometown, Tuen Mun, a new high rise development in the Hong Kong New Territories, to Mong Kok, in central Hong Kong, hoping to find her boyfriend. When she does, predictably he's not interested in her.

Along for the adventures are Banana and Bean Curd, a butch dyke, and her femme girlfriend, Sissy. After doing heavy drugs, Sissy flaunts the overprotective Bean Curd and decides to run off with a boy. In anger, Bean Curd starts cutting herself and the trio end up at a clinic to patch up the cutter. Cookie uses the occasion to get an abortion. The sequence has a dream/nightmare aspect to it, including fantasy-coded music track, with flashforwards and flashbacks. As Cookie wanders around the office suite, grotesque objects appear, as well as peculiar items such as a peddle driven sewing machine in one room that seems to be used for making doll clothing, and inserted shots. The scene culminates in the abortion procedure which includes the female doctor as a grotesque and a foot operated vacuum pump which ends with a close up of a glass jar receiving the bloody extraction. Fade to black and then the waiting room where a nurse presents Cookie with a specimen container with the fetus.





The gal pals join a friend who supplies hard drugs. L-R: Banana, the dealer, Sissy, Cookie, and Bean Curd. They begin to make bongs for a party, but Cookie remains withdrawn, having just been dumped by the guy who got her pregnant.



Wandering in the clinic before her abortion procedure, Cookie sees inexplicable two plastic legs on an exam table: artificial limbs? mannequin parts?

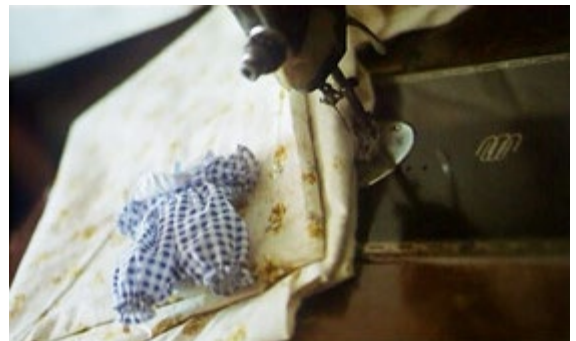
Joined by boys, the party is underway when Cookie sees several baby dolls in a refrigerator, a symbolic vision of her own unwanted pregnancy.



Cookie continues her dream-like exploration of the clinic.



She sees the female MD at her desk eating Mo Yan Ka Sai, a rice pudding with red beans on a stick. A reverse shot close-up makes the action especially grotesque.



A back room contains an old fashioned treadle sewing machine and tiny doll clothing.



A flashforward shows Cookie and girlfriends on a bus after the abortion (indicating the procedure was done,



From Cookie's POV in the stirrups of the exam table, she imagines the MD laughing maniacally. The soundtrack



without complications). A layered image shows the many neon signs of Kowloon (present) and the MD's medical instruments (flashback).

complements this strange subjective imagining of the procedure. [The shot is a non-diegetic insert in the sense that it isn't "really" happening, but it is, within the sequence, much like scary shots in Hong Kong ghost and horror films, as if Cookie's re-imagining of the transpired event is shaped within other popular culture images.]



The abortion procedure begins.



The MD pumps a foot pedal for vacuum extraction. In Cookie's imagination she sees feet actively operating the treadle sewing machine



We see blood flowing in the vacuum tube, and then an active splatter of blood across Cookie on the table. Later we understand that this was a fantasy shot, not an actual event, as with many other shots in the clinic.



A shock cut ends the abortion procedure sequence with a close up of a vacuum jar and the arrival of the extracted fetus to the container. Fade to black.



Recovering in the waiting room, the



Back home, Cookie goes up a hillside

nurse gives Cookie a specimen container with the extracted fetus.

and buries the fetus along with one of her earrings and a small doll. She speaks to her ex-boyfriend, saying their child is dead, and that she's learned boyfriends are not important, your friends are everything. Without the traditional Buddhist incense burned to the dead (the smoke rising to Heaven), she lights a cigarette and places it on the small dirt mound.



At the intersection of childhood (the doll), teen style (the earring), and womanhood (the fetus), Cookie is a tiny figure in the grand landscape of a New Territories town as she plaintively asks when and if the mother who abandoned her will ever contact her.

What seems most remarkable about the sequence from a U.S. perspective is precisely its frank realism (though framed with dream or surreal elements). Free of a moralizing discourse, the abortion is presented as “matter of fact” rather than as “this is a terrible thing.” It does, along with the next sequence, of burial, evoke pathos, largely around this child-woman on the cusp of change. Cookie deserves better, but anyone deserves better or everyone deserves better.

[Go to page 4](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### *The Untold Story*

Often cited as an example of excessive violence or the type of low-grade film produced under Hong Kong's Category III (most restricted due to sex and/or violence), *The Untold Story* (d. Danny Lee [Li Hsiu Hsien], 1993) deserves re-evaluation. Clearly commercial in origin and intent, the film (based on an actual case from the mid-1980s) begins with a group of fairly comic and inept cops investigating human remains that washed up on a beach and a missing family that ran a restaurant. The restaurant's current operator appears first in flashback fleeing Hong Kong for Macau after committing murder in a gambling quarrel. Answering police questions, Wong (Herman Yau) claims he bought the restaurant (and offers the cops pork buns). The bumbling police finally figure out that he did something to the previous owners, and beat it out of him during interrogations. As the cops become increasingly angry and appalled, and once aware of what was in the "pork buns" they scarfed down, their own violence escalates. The killer's confession is told in graphic flashback, with especially horrifying murder of the children and grinding the bodies up for pork buns. The shift in register from an initial comic tone with buffoon cops to an increasing violence, viciousness, and graphic derangement and police themselves going out of control, challenges the audience to move from laughing at the film (both the police and the barbequed "pork" situation) to stomach-churning discomfort.

In addition to raising issues of disgust in terms of (unsuspected) cannibalism, *The Untold Story* raises questions of disgust through its use of extreme graphic violence. In trying to specify Category 3 films, a new classification allowing a wider latitude to sex and violence for adult audiences which appeared in Hong Kong shortly after the Tiananmen events, Julian Stringer argues that the Category 3 films often allegorize deep class divisions in Hong Kong in the 1990s.[21][[open notes in new window](#)] With the pending Hong Kong handover to the PRC in 1997 and the repression of Tiananmen in mind, the most privileged sector sought dual citizenship, or moved abroad permanently, or sent their kids to school abroad hoping to establish the basis for foreign citizenship. However the vast mass of Hong Kong people had no such option. Stringer argues that many Category 3 films expressed the political and social anxieties of those who couldn't leave. The films played in cheaper, more run-down theaters (in contrast to a new set of multiplexes playing many glossy U.S. and pan-Asian films). Stringer's general point is doubtless valid.[22]

There is always a problem in dealing with films that exploit sex and/or violence, or sex and violence (and other taboos such as drug use). For some people, especially censors and gatekeepers, the mere presence of certain images marks them as unworthy. But the defensive response often acknowledges the existence of offensive material and to then argue for a higher purpose: artistic, moral, political, etc.[23] The point I want to make here is that while close textual analysis is valuable and essential, the question of disgust, often phrased in terms of depictions being "excessive" or "gratuitous," cannot be settled

in terms of the text itself. To argue only the text, can only end with each (or every) side asserting *their* interpretation is the best. It becomes a King of the Hill battle. Rather, as I indicated earlier in this article, there is a range of audience response to the text, and we have to understand that variation. Where people “draw the line” varies. That is, to use a conventional phrasing from contemporary film theory, meaning is a constructed relation between a text and viewer/audience. And that viewer exists socially, with variation.

Tony Williams, who frequently writes on horror films, follows Stringer in offering a social analysis of *The Untold Story*.<sup>[24]</sup> “Despite its graphic violence, *The Untold Story* is not to be dismissed as a sleazy, gratuitous production. It also deals with real-life social issues involving violence and exploitation in Hong Kong society.” (209) Yet the argument here is slippery. True, the film depicts violence and exploitation, but does it really examine it in any way that allows for a greater understanding? And if so, of what? As opposed to a naturalistic depiction of the environment, which at least recognizes the material form of social relations as shaping character behavior, *The Untold Story* tells us very little about Hong Kong (or more accurately Macau which is where the main action is set after the initial pre-title violence).<sup>[25]</sup>

Williams puts aside the sexual violence of the rape and murder of the waitress. In contrast to Williams, I would argue that Wong is shown as cheating at gambling, quick to anger and rage, and in no way remorseful. When he himself is victimized by police interrogation and by other prisoners, he tries to kill himself by biting his wrists—ironically a kind of self-cannibalism. After medical torture by police and medical staff, he finally does kill himself, slashing his wrists. He is never sympathetic and in fact he kills two of the most sympathetic characters—the restaurant cook and the waitress—in brutal ways (and they, of course, are true proletarians), and an entire family: parents, grandmother, and five young children.

William’s reading of the film as a social-political statement critical of the authorities and showing the desperate situation of those at the bottom of the social/economic ladder tends to special pleading. Yes, the authorities will do anything including physical and medical torture. But there is nothing redeeming about Wong, while his victims are shown dying horrible deaths that they don’t “deserve.” For Williams, the social message compensates for the violence. He reads Category 3 as showing “tragedy and farce,” while I would tend to assign it to melodramatic excess, the grotesque, and farce. The rape/murder sequence, for example, does aim to frighten the audience by showing something so extreme that there is no possible excuse for the character’s behavior. Similarly, after killing the family in the restaurant, Wong goes out of his way to get the grandmother and bring her to the scene of dead bodies so he can murder her too. He tells the police that she was a perennial “busybody” who came over to the restaurant simply to get a free meal. In this barrage of angry violence, there is a depiction of violence begetting violence, but no resting point.





In the pre-title scene, following a gambling quarrel, Wong Chi Hang (Anthony Wong) beats up, sets afire his opponent, and flees Hong Kong for Macau. While filled with violent action, the sequence is less disgusting than later murders.



Shifting to Macau, Wong is now running a restaurant. We first see him cutting up a pig and eviscerating its organs.



Rack focus shot. In the foreground the waitress wipes her hands on her apron, inadvertently showing her thigh. The focus shifts to the background where we see Wong, huge meat cleaver in hand, chopping up the pig parts, foreshadowing the later sexual violence.



The waitress sees him peering and straightens her skirt. Reaction shot: close up of the cleaver cutting the pig's thigh/ham.



Meanwhile, the cops are endlessly goofing around. The Lieutenant has a new hooker on his arm every time he appears which the guys ogle. The butch-dressed female of the squad (right) mocks their behavior.



When a new employee gets suspicious and spots the boss cheating at gambling, Wong kills him in a dark room at night. The details of the fight are obscured but the sequence includes fairly conventional horror suspense: the body is dead, but when Wong tries to get away, the victim's death grip holds onto his leg and the cleaver must be used to chop off the hand. Wong begins cutting up the body on a kitchen table, below the frame. Opening the torso he lifts the guts and puts them in a soup pot and continues the bloody process.



Turning the body over, we finally get a close look at the face. The bill spindle Wong initially used to blind the victim is still in the eye socket. This kind of grotesque detail close up follows conventional horror shock effects.



Changing to comic grotesque, a shot shows the bloody lower torso and the meat cleaver caressing the buttocks. The camera pans up as Wong begins to slice the rump.



Details of the food preparation/corpse disposal end with a straight cut to fresh steamed buns.



Back at the police station, the guys ogle another woman, not realizing it is the squad's female in a sexy sheath dress.



Sent to investigate at the restaurant, the cops accept some fresh barbequed meat buns from Wong.



Back at the station with Wong's gift of fresh buns, the whole group dives in.



Everyone relishes the tasty treat. Only the Lieutenant declines, "I never eat barbeque pork buns. You never know what's in the filling."

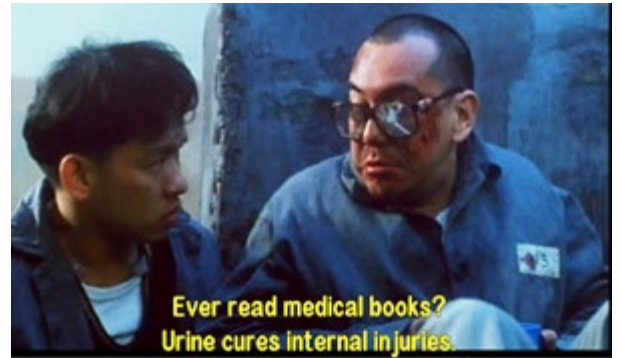
[\[Click here to see next sequence of images: attack, rape, murder of the waitress.\]](#)  
Captions follow here below.]

- Following this comic interlude, back at the restaurant, realizing the waitress is suspicious, Wong attacks her after closing up. He hits her, rips her clothing off, and ties her up. This begins the most explicitly brutal attack so far.
- Wong mauls the waitress and brutally rapes her. There are close-ups of her distressed face and his demented anger.
- After the sex act, he grabs a bunch of chop sticks and in this shot from under the table, swings them into her body.
- The murderous assault continues with his thrusting and her agony. There is an obvious visual parallel of facial and body expression between the depicted physical assault and the expressions of intense feeling during sexual intercourse. But it remains a painful parallel, not a crossing over of boundaries. Remarkably, actor Anthony Wong, always manages to express his character's inner rage; he was awarded best actor for 1993 at the Hong Kong Film awards.
- The camera returns to a shot from under the table; Wong removes the chopsticks and there is a gush of blood. Cut to above: bloody chopsticks fall on floor, ending the sequence.





Wong is captured trying to leave Macau. The police swarm him, subdue him, he is held against a wall and gut-punched by the Lieutenant in front of a crowd, then taken behind a screen and worked over by other cops. Finally, back at the police station, the squad beats him severely. Moved into a hall with reporters, he yells about police brutality



Prevented from further trying to beat a confession out of him, the police outsource the job to prisoners (including the murdered restaurant owner's brother who is in jail). The disgusting material escalates. Wong's head is pushed into a dirty toilet, he's punched until he begins to piss blood, and appealing to another prisoner, he drinks that guy's urine, saying it cures internal bleeding. Finally he bites his wrists in a suicide attempt.



Taken to a hospital to recover, the police devise a new torture plan with the doctor. Wong is kept hyper stimulated on drugs for three days and sleep deprived. Finally in near-delirium, he confesses. In flashback, we see the murder of the restaurant owner and his family.

[\[Click here to see next sequence of images: murder of restaurant owner's family.\]](#)  
Captions follow here below.]

- The parents have to witness Wong cut their son's throat. They are then killed in front of the children who are one by one destroyed.
- There are repeated close-up shots of the terrorized children's faces as they are about to be murdered with the meat cleaver.

The escalation of violence, by the murderer and then by the investigating police, is a theme and defines the rhythmic trajectory of the narrative. My visual analysis here stresses key moments, but a much more fine and close analysis of acting, shot composition, lighting, and editing is possible. Overall, the film balances between cheap exploitation and serious statement. Or in other words, it shows a plurality of themes, moments, actions, and affects. It can, then, be read either way or as an amalgam of both.



Undeniably, it is commercially effective, with the genre's requisite suspense and horror, excellent performance and cinematography, and effective sound and music tracks.

[Go to page 5](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

### 5: Politics across cultures

What I've tried to do here in considering three different films is present a starting point for a better analysis of disgust across cultures. I've argued that because of anti-abortion organizing and political controversy in the U.S., the possible range of what can be shown in depictions of abortion is very narrow. Thus, one of the very few depictions of abortion procedure, *If These Walls Could Talk: 1952*, can only show a "tragic" outcome to abortion procedure and not use a fetus image at all.[26][[open endnotes in new window](#)] In contrast, the Hong Kong youth-themed film, *Spacked Out*, uses remarkably graphic details in showing the procedure and the result (highlighted by surreal style). The film's attitude to the procedure is casual, frank, and without regret. The comparison reveals a different social and political groundwork in the two cultures of origin which in turn informs the creative product and respective audience understanding.

To return to my original starting point, *Dumplings*. My analysis of that film clearly spells out the serious allegory and social critique at the heart of Fruit Chan's film. But I understand that someone could still object to the film's visual depiction of making dumplings from fetuses and the process of abortion. Everyone has to draw the line somewhere to be human. At the same time, the film does rise above its tabloid news origins (as does *The Untold Story*, I'd say). While he hasn't discussed it in interviews, the likely source of Fruit Chan's film was an urban legend from the mid-1990s. An article appeared in the Hong Kong English language tabloid publication *Eastern Express*, "Aborted Babies Sold as Health Food for \$10." [27] It raised the blood libel charge (that another nation or subculture kidnaps, slaughters, and eats children). In the article, author Bruce Gilley claims hearsay knowledge and "rumours" that in Shenshen China, aborted fetuses were routinely turned into rejuvenation food. Quotes from claimed interviewees (with extremely common names and no further identification) report the abortion leftovers are commonly available. A response article by Poppy Dixon describes how the original fiction was picked up by right wing fundamentalist Christians in the summer of 1995 to denounce U.S. participation in the UN Conference on Women in Beijing.[28] The following year the fringe right and anti-abortion forces amplified the story, and eventually far right members of the U.S. Congress entered remarks about it in the Congressional Record as part of their denunciations of China. Fruit Chan spun this slanderous propaganda story into a specific dramatic fiction which brought out a very different social-political analysis for a very different end.

Turning to murderous violence and cannibalism, *The Untold Story* presents two different kinds of revulsion. First, the eating of human flesh, which is

largely treated as a joke and which results (once discovered) in gastric distress for the cops. Second, the extreme violence of rape and murder by Wong and torture by the police for confession shows that violence itself escalates violence and it is emotionally horrifying and morally repulsive. Explaining the film for a Western readership, Julian Stringer and Tony Williams provide a plausible grounding for justifying the film's violence by arguing it dramatizes the social-political situation of its intended primary audience: the working class and dispossessed of Hong Kong. This critical context waives concerns about violent depictions.

As a working distinction: cheap exploitation presents something shocking primarily for its shock effect, rather than for a larger narrative or aesthetic purpose. The shock exists primarily for just that moment, for that audience reaction of stomach-turning surprise. This is the sense of gore film or splatter cinema at its most basic, the sort of thing which often brings mention of Herschell Gordon Lewis's exploitation film, *Blood Feast* (1963) as the start of a horror film trend.



*Blood Feast's* thrifty effects: lots of red paint and butcher shop offal.

It is in the same league as *Fear Factor's* “yuck”: something presented for a specific and predictable response (for the overwhelming majority of the audience) and no more. Shock for shock's sake; or in the ironic version, for a laugh. There is no move to a more serious level, such as raising ethical issues, or extending character development for a greater narrative purpose.

Because of this considerable violence or graphic sexuality is often called “gratuitous” or “excessive.” It goes beyond what is strictly needed for plot or character, it is, in short, part of spectacle. But, of course, so are the action film, or most musicals, etc. Because there has been a significant shift in aesthetic analysis of film, particularly popular genre film, by the recent reconsideration of the nature and aesthetics of spectacle, we have to stop and think through the all too easy dismissal of cinematic excess, especially when sex and violence are involved.

To return to my earlier tripartite model. Anyone and everyone will have a response that is partly “universal” that is based in human nature, in the biological evolution of the species. It is physical and embodied: for disgust, it

is the aversion reaction. Given certain physical stimuli, humans will gag and reject. But this extends beyond the mechanics of the body to a repulsion that is grounded in a cultural level of being. It is historical, cultural, learned, in short: sociological and ideological. And it is also individual, formed within the idiolect of personal response. At this level, it is visceral and bodily in its expression, but also embodied in one's emotions and memory, and also informed by one's moral and ethical framework.

An example. When Wong confesses under medical duress that he disposed of the bodies by making "pork buns" the police gather around him begin to choke and then vomit with the realization that they ate them. Even though the dumpling consumption took place many days earlier, the fact of it having happened brings on a visceral response. Cognition of what happened stimulates a new revulsion expressed with the body and relying on emotional processing within a cultural/ideological framework. The moment is comic, and the audience can laugh because they are not directly implicated in the joke. However the rape/murder and child murders short-circuit any "distancing"—ironic, generic, or aesthetic. Audience response is much closer to our reaction as if the depicted scene were really happening before us.[29]

Of course it is quite possible for someone, some critic, to (mis)read a work that *does* go beyond mere shock as not doing so, and to dismiss it. Early on some critics viewed David Cronenberg this way: mistakenly, I would argue, and with time the body of his films reveals a seriousness of purpose.[30] Takishi Miike's *Imprint* (discussed at length in this issue by William Leung) would be another case. Or, it is possible for critics/fans to argue for the understanding of or value of a specific film in terms that almost no one else can recognize. We have to allow for demented and perverse readings without endorsing them as valid. Clearly this raises an important discussion which I will have to return to later in this essay involving exploitation, the representation of violence, boundaries, and censorship, as well as the nature of entertainment in a market economy.

The rise of a distinct market in the West for "Asian Extreme" horror cinema and the increased circulation and availability of world cinemas dramatizes the nature and problems of cross cultural (mis)understanding and analysis. Developing a richer discussion needs to address new films and new film cycles (as the *Jump Cut* sections on horror films have begun to do), pay attention to new methods and topics such as considering the senses and emotions in media analysis, work out more precisely the nature of disgust and abjection as concepts and projective audience identifications, delineate the situation of ethics and morality in relation to entertainment and exploitation in a market economy, and understand aesthetics of these controversial dramatic narratives. That agenda will shape the next installment in this essay.

[Go to Notes page](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-](#)



# JUMP CUT

## A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

### Notes

1. Several people gave me particularly acute responses to earlier drafts of this article: Dave Andrews, Dave Tolchinsky, Catherine Clepper, Julia Lesage, John Hess, Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece.

[\[return to page 1 of essay\]](#)

2. Links to JC TOC pages for 49, 50.

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/index.html>

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/index.html>

3. “Serving the People: *Dumplings*,” *Jump Cut* no. 49 (April 2007).

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/Dumplings/index.html>

4. I don’t have a precise source for this quote, which I wrote down when I first heard it, so I’m sure it is accurate, but I’d appreciate any help in tracking down the reference.

5. Although of course this is not uniform. In the U.S., people in rural areas often see dogs as primarily work animals and value them as such; people in the inner city often view them as primarily watch dogs and automatically considered dangerous and threatening unless proven otherwise. Recent scandals around organized dog fighting and dog racing dramatize the norm that canines should not be treated cruelly. In most of the developing world, only the wealthiest have companion animals; rather than members of the household, dogs are considered functional with barely any sentiment attached to their injury or death.

6. Chuck Kleinhans, “Dog Eat Dog: Neo-imperialism in Kim Ki-duk’s *Address Unknown* (Suchwiin bulmyeong (2001),” *Visual Anthropology*. 22: 182-199, 2009.

7. [http://www.petatv.com/tvpopup/video.asp?video=trent\\_fur&Player=wm&speed=\\_med](http://www.petatv.com/tvpopup/video.asp?video=trent_fur&Player=wm&speed=_med)

8. Richard Spencer, “China hunting for online kitten killer,” *National Post* (Canada) March 4, 2006, p. A15. Later reports indicated the woman was found and turned out to be a distressed single mother who did it for the money. Apprehended, she expressed regret.

9. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/article3552377.ece>

10. A dish that consists of codfish processed with lye and subsequently reconstituted.

11. Though I have tried eel (seemed creepy to my mind), whale (before they were declared endangered), snails (NYC French restaurant), horsemeat (in France and in Chicago), guinea pigs (in Peru in a peanut sauce), and rabbit (when I was in the Navy; it was offered for the sailors from the South while the ones from the North had lobster—each thinking the other choice was bizarre or gross).

British cinema professor Geoffrey Nowell-Smith once told me that early in his career he taught in a French boarding school which served rabbit once a week. The serving platter that went to the teacher's table was first given to the biology teacher who inspected the anatomy to ensure it was rabbit after an earlier cook was caught serving cats.

12. Evidenced in the book *Fear Factor: Yuck! Grossest Stunts Ever*, aimed at the 9-12 year old market. See also:

<http://www.kidzworld.com/article/4924-top-ten-grossest-fear-factor-stunts>

Of course academic food anthropologists study cuisine as an entry point to understanding specific cultures in larger terms, and are attentive to the social and historical context of food and food preparation and consumption customs. Entertainment shows seldom touch on these matters.

13. For a fuller discussion of Chan's work to date, see Wimal Dissanayake's essay, "The Class Imaginary in Fruit Chan's Films,"

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/FruitChan-class/index.html>

[[return to page 2 of essay](#)]

14. I don't think it's impossible or undesirable to teach the film. Rather, I think that teaching it and dealing with abortion imagery requires an expenditure of extra class time and energy that I wasn't willing to make in this particular case. I discuss a similar problem in teaching graphic sexual images in my article: "Teaching Sexual Images: Some Pragmatics," *Jump Cut* no. 40 (March, 1996), pp. 119-122

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinesays/JC40folder/TeachPornPragmatics.html>

15. Those outside the U.S. might not be aware of this. The anti-abortion movement ranges from moderates who seek changes through traditional pressure group efforts such as electoral politics and chipping away at abortion rights through legislation, judicial decisions, and administrative practices to right wing media pundits such as Bill O'Reilly who label medical personnel "baby killers" and dismiss women who seek abortions as only motivated by self interested convenience. The aggressive activists who publicly demonstrate and harass at women's clinics extend to fringe elements who have attacked and assassinated MDs. At the current moment, some abortion foes are denouncing the use of oral contraceptives as a form of abortion. As I was

completing this article in Spring 2009, a Kansas doctor who performed abortions was shot to death in his church. The movement prefers to call itself “pro-life” rather than “anti-abortion.” On the other side, the counter movement prefers to identify as “pro-choice” rather than “pro-abortion.”

16. I have witnessed this at attempts to blockade women’s clinics, in marching demonstrations against abortion, and at rallies. At certain moments in the past some anti-abortion groups purchased large billboard space to present such images as part of their campaigns; this seems to be dormant at present. One of the repeated and most memorable images is of a bloody “fetus” in a plastic bag attached to a long pole or placard. It is often claimed that this item was “found” in the waste trash behind a clinic. Given the item’s size it seems much more likely that it is a medical/anatomical sample such as a dissection pig, or a dog or sheep fetus, or a doll. Of course the contrast between an official rhetoric of “honoring life” and the grotesque display of bloody dead flesh for shock purposes reveals a contradiction which might indicate a mental disorder among the people waving these items. Moderate elements of the anti-abortion movement try to distance themselves from these extremists and crazies.

17. The events are summarized in Robin Wilson, “Yale Student’s Art Project Stirs Debate Over the Limits of Academic Freedom,” *Chronicle of Higher Education daily news*, Monday April 21, 2008.  
<http://chronicle.com/daily/2008/04/2562n.htm>.

But the incident was also part of ongoing *Chronicle* newsblog coverage from April 17 to April 22. The blog comments section was especially intensive and gave evidence of the variety of possible responses. An update of the controversy: Robin Wilson, “Controversy Over Student's Art Exhibit at Yale Raises Issues of Academic Freedom,” *Chronicle* May 2, 2008.  
<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i34/34a01202.htm>

18. Abortion foes would argue that the fetus is a third person present; I do not believe a fetus is a person.

19. Abortion was illegal throughout the U.S. at that point except under certain conditions which threatened the mother’s life in which case a medical operation might be possible. Restrictions on simple contraception were also severe. Connecticut, for example, outlawed even condoms, diaphragms, and spermicidal jelly. Many college student health clinics would not prescribe birth control pills or diaphragms for unmarried students. The wealthy and privileged could and did go abroad for medically supervised abortions.

20. The first two episodes were written and directed by Nancy Savoca, while the third was directed by Cher. It is perhaps the most bizarre wrenching of Cher’s star image because the role of MD and outspoken abortion clinic administrator seems so at odds with the star’s image as a singer and entertainer (with especially glossy and campy over-the-top music videos and Las Vegas stage concerts at this point in her career), pitchwoman for her brand named line of cosmetics in TV infomercials, and a previous dramatic career effectively playing working class women (e.g., *Silkwood*, 1983; *Mask*, 1985, *Mermaids*, 1990). The flawless surgically enhanced and cosmetically

perfect face seems remarkably at odds with the role of socially conscious crusading feminist health professional.

21. Julian Stringer, "Category 3: Sex and Violence in Postmodern Hong Kong," in *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1999), 361-379.

[\[return to page 4 of essay\]](#)

22. But he doesn't fully account for the general decline in Hong Kong theatrical gross in the colony and abroad due to factors such as the bursting of the 90s Asian economic bubble, the expansion of VCD and DVD sales and piracy, marketing barriers such Hong Kong films faced abroad in major markets such as Taiwan, the PRC, and Singapore, and local censorship barriers elsewhere. The Category 3 films do not cross over as easily as other Hong Kong genres such as comedies, pop musicals, martial arts, police action, etc.

23. For a forceful example, see Roger Ebert's review of Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* which depicts a violent beating and what is commonly acknowledged as the most violent and relentless rape shown on film.

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20030314/REVIEWS/303140303/1023>

24. Tony Williams, "Hong Kong Social Horror: Tragedy and Farce in Category 3," in *Horror International*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams, (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2005), 203-219.

25. The film opens with a night time street-level panning shot, looking up, which identifies the neighborhood and presumably the place we are in after the cut as a small restaurant. Both Springer and Williams make a great deal of this as establishing the environment (incredibly, Williams compares it to Hitchcock), but it is really a very quick and conventional establishing shot; for a comparison to shots that really do establish the Hong Kong tenements and slums, see my analysis of *Dumplings*, or other Fruit Chan films such as *Hong Kong/Hollywood*, *Little Cheung*, etc.

26. John Carpenter's *Pro-Life* for the Showtime Masters of Horror season two depicts a young woman who goes to an abortion clinic seeking to terminate the life she carries. Her father and brothers show up, guns in hand, to stop the procedure, only to discover the birth is of a monster protected by its demon father. [\[return to page 5\]](#)

27. by Bruce Gilley, April 12, 1995. Reproduced at:

<http://www.chinasucks.org/fetal.htm>

28. "Eating Fetuses: The lurid Christian fantasy of godless Chinese eating 'unborn children'."

[http://www.jesus21.com/poppydixon/sex/chinese\\_eating\\_fetuses.html](http://www.jesus21.com/poppydixon/sex/chinese_eating_fetuses.html).

See also: "Urban Legends and Folklore: Do They Eat Babies in China?"

<http://urbanlegends.about.com/>



29. The question of aesthetic distance and empathetic response will be addressed in detail in a later section of this essay.

30. Cronenberg has occasionally again become a focal point for controversy with *Crash* (1996) becoming a central argument about censorship in the UK.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Media salad

by Chuck Kleinhans

### Little books

Aufderheide, Patricia. *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2007. \$9.95 US.

A new addition to Oxford's series of authoritative brief surveys, Pat Aufderheide's book provides an efficient overview of documentary film. Given the notable changes in the field since the "social documentary" tradition dominated the subject thirty years ago, the book manages to respect tradition while flagging the newer developments over the past two decades. In addition to the basic history, Aufderheide deals efficiently with perennial questions such as propaganda, ethics, ethnography, and accomplishes a nice concise survey of scholarship. This is just the right supplementary book for a class that deals with some forms of documentary and needs a quick survey. Aufderheide started and runs the Center for Social Media at American University which pioneers information and advocacy for better documentaries:

<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/>

[Full disclosure: I've known Aufderheide professionally for 30 some years]

Some of the other titles in the Very Short Introduction series that I've liked include: Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art*; Jonathan Culler, *Barthes*; Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism*; and Cynthia Freeland, *Art Theory*.

### Surveying the field

The online Australian media journal *Screening the Past* celebrated their tenth anniversary with a "survey of the field" of notable work from the past ten years of media studies. The 59 submissions (ranging from Dudley Andrew to Paul Willemen, Laleen Jayamanne to Janet Wasko—and including this writer) provide an interesting overview from a variety of specialties and interests. An often provocative state of the art overview; and a great start for your own reading list.

[http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthe past/22/field-survey.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthe%20past/22/field-survey.html)

### Abu Ghraib in art history perspective

Eisenman, Stephen F. *The Abu Ghraib Effect*. London: Reaktion

A professor of art history at Northwestern, Stephen Eisenman, writes a short, condensed book on the Abu Ghraib which illuminates some of the disturbing power of the images. But he is also concerned with the fact that they are absorbed into the dominant ideology:

“What if the US public and the amateur photographers at Abu Ghraib share a kind of moral blindness—let us call it the ‘Abu Ghraib effect’—that allows them to ignore, or even to justify, however partially or provisionally, the facts of degradation and brutality manifest in the pictures?” (9)

He points at the persistence of a “pathos formula” of passionate suffering in Western classical art ranging from ancient Greece and imperial Rome to work by Raphael, Michelangelo, and Bernini: “the motif of tortured people and tormented animals who appear to sanction their own abuse...” (16) Thus the Abu Ghraib torture photos serve to affirm that the military victors are omnipotent and the prisoners are abject and inhuman which in turn justifies the power relation, the violence exacted on the defenseless.

Eisenman also points to a counter-tradition which resists the formula in which victims welcome their own torture and death. This direction represented by Hogarth, the anti-slavery movement, David’s *Death of Marat*, Goya, Courbet, Manet, and some modern artists works to show the inhumanity of torture and military murder. “*Guernica* is a work of art whose creator has suspended the oppressive, classical equation of beauty, order and power.” (91) But he also warns that the rise of imperialism and totalitarian regimes in 20C re-invigorated the pathos formula: including mass culture (referring to the requisite torture scenes in James Bond movies and the TV series 24). For Eisenman, the elaborate staging of scenes and the photos of them at Abu Ghraib (sanctioned by higher authority)

“was not to obtain information from enemy combatants, or even to inflict punishment; it was to shame prisoners and to gratify ...the feelings of national and racial superiority of the soldiers and civilians at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, and to uphold the moral and political necessity of the American military venture in the face of worldwide opposition and condemnation.” (98)

While the book clearly argues Eisenman’s central thesis, its extreme brevity produces problems for deeper analysis. He takes exception to thinkers who initially linked the photos to pornography (they are not intended to be erotic, he replies) and lynching photos (obscures the purpose of the prison photos and their historical roots). But he sidesteps the nature of the photos as always intentionally showing (a) the prisoners’ abject shame and (b) the military’s theatricalization of their power, and also revealing (c) their additional and unavoidable documentation of a crime to outside judges. The author could have usefully extended his analysis by considering the considerable critical literature produced by feminists on images of rape and rape threat (e.g., Julia Lesage’s essay on rape threat in cinema:

<http://www.uoregon.edu/~jlesage/Juliafolder/RAPETHREAT.HTML>).

The mixture of power and sexuality has been extensively analyzed by feminists discussing rape and clearly pertains to the prison photos.

Additionally there's a well established discussion of the history of war photography which vastly broadens the issues. Obviously, depending on who—which side—is viewing them, civilian casualties can be interpreted as regrettable “collateral damage” or “brutality”; battlefield deaths can be read as “heroic sacrifice” or “wasted losses.” And the larger role of media gatekeeping pertains. We know well that images of Iraqi civilian suffering were kept out of the media in the years preceding the second Gulf war, just as horrifying battlefield deaths were erased from the visual record of the first Gulf war.

And the topic begs for elaboration. What was the use and function of WW2 atrocity photos such as the Japanese assault on Nanking civilians. Did the Nazis take photographs in the concentration camps? (Perhaps not, we remember the documentary images of the camps at liberation; what would have been the point of images earlier?). What of the images of Mussolini's body, or collaborators with the losing side at the end of the war? And the famous Vietnam image of a street execution, or self-immolating Buddhist monks, or napalm victims fleeing US attacks?

The Abu Ghraib images have at least a double valance. While Eisenman understandably regrets that they were for the most part ideologically absorbed in the US, he neglects that they have been read precisely opposite in the rest of the world, particularly the Muslim world. While they appeared after Eisenman finished his book, analytic films such as *Taxi to the Dark Side* and *Standard Operating Procedure* recontextualize the photos in the political direction he seeks.

Eisenman also plays down one of the explicit purposes of the photos, which was direct humiliation of prisoners whose faces were visible and thus identifiable. They were told that the photos would be shown in their home locales and thus they would never be able to return with any personal or familial dignity. The psychological effect intended to convince the prisoners they had no future and thus should confess and collaborate.

Eisenman's more basic argument seems to be, from his brief “afterward,” a quarrel with the dominant narratives of Western art history, particularly development, progress, and the idolization of Europe. But along the way, he falls into thoughtless editorializing that reveals his own elitism. Cleverly, he labels the prison guards “Right-wing Deleuzians...desiring—machines stymied in familial, social and economic spheres at home, but let loose in Iraq.” (109)

“[Lynndie] England, a young woman from rural Cumberland, West Virginia, enlists in the Army Reserves in order to quit her job at a chicken processing-plant in Moorhead, a factory singled out by PETA (and filmed) because of its particular cruelty to animals. Sent to Iraq in 2003, she finds there an outlet for her repressed desires: she learns to torture and kill, and pairs up with Greener [the ringleader and instigator of the photos].” (109-10)

How precisely does Eisenman know England's “repressed desires”? One



could, based on the Wikipedia entry for England (which seems like the apparent source for Eisenman's speculation), also note that she joined the Reserves to get money for college, and that given the charges she faced and her defense and interviews she gave before and after her court martial, that she was directed by others, particularly her boyfriend Greener, to appear in the pictures, and that she was reluctant, but "didn't want to lose him." That's a somewhat different motivation, than Eisenman's rearticulation of Adorno's Authoritarian Personality, one quite well thought through by feminists. *The Abu Gharib Effect* makes an interesting start on analysis of the prison photos, but there's much more to be said.

---

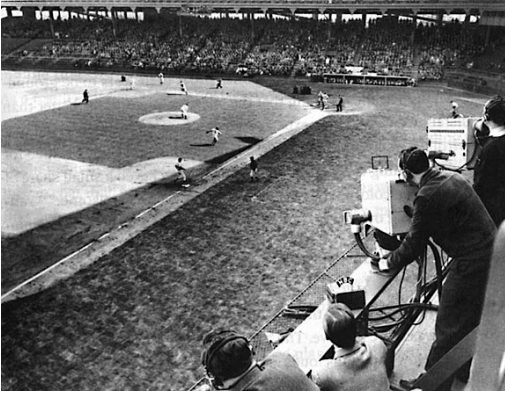
[To top](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



NBC uses two cameras to cover a game at Ebbets Field in 1940. That NBC baseball season was notable, as their Dodger broadcasts included the first networked baseball game, which was seen in New York and by hospital patients in Schenectady. The games that year also contained some of the first televised commercials.

## Baseball on TV

by [Deborah Tudor](#)

*Center Field Shot: A History of Baseball on Television* by James Walker and Robert Bellamy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008). 402 pages. \$24.95

Books about the relation between baseball and television too often resort to commonplace generalizations highlighting the negative effects the evil empire of the air has had on America's pastime. *Center Field Shot* provides a good corrective to this pervasive idea through its comprehensive, detailed history of the shifting economic relationships between television and baseball. The book divides this field of inquiry into broad thematic sections: Local, National, Marriage, and Coverage. The first three sections map the wide variety of arrangements and agreements between major league baseball owners and television stations and networks; the last section deals with announcers and innovations in the coverage of the sport. The book offers a complete analysis of legal and economic policies. However, larger cultural contexts for media and baseball are dealt with rather perfunctorily.

## Economic adversaries and partners

Major League baseball and the television industry have oscillated between adversarial and cooperative economic relationships. The book traces the early broadcasts by discussing the quality of coverage; the protectivist nature of early baseball owners who feared that television would diminish attendance; the exploitation of television as publicity; and the emergence of complicated rights packages. The outgrowth of this history can be seen in the multiple channels that covered baseball on television daily migrated from free broadcast to cable and satellite networks.

The book's strength lies in the authors' meticulous explanations of these economic processes. Although much of the broad outline of this story is known, the details of the television-baseball compacts over the years will enrich the knowledge of both communication and sports scholars. Walker and Bellamy have assembled an impressive array of data about economic arrangements and have organized it in a useful fashion. What emerges is a clear picture of how baseball is affected by the "ongoing restructuring of the broadcast industry" (43). The authors clarify the bewildering array of contract arrangements that have existed, the types of coverage, from local stations and regional sports networks to national broadcast and cable and satellite sportscasts. Walker and Bellamy are careful analysts, and the economic analysis in this book is clear, well documented, and finely detailed.



Playoffs come to television: The 1951 Dodger-Giants playoff draws an audience to an appliance storefront on a rainy day in San Francisco. This was a complicated coast-to-coast broadcast. CBS had the rights to this game but had to get the signal from ABC, who had a prior distribution agreement. ABC in turn got the game coverage from WOR-TV, which had the regular season rights to the Dodgers' games. This example illustrates the complexity of early national broadcast rights, which were often patchwork agreements.

The discussion of vertical integration provides a good example of the author's nuanced understanding of the economics of baseball on television. They carefully track the attempts at vertical integration over the past forty-fifty years. In the 1960s, vertical integration attempts of such as CBS' acquisition of the Yankees, failed due to lack of sufficient distribution channels. This section indicates that the explosion of channels creates an industrial structure allowing vertical integration between media and baseball to succeed. The authors point out that vertical integration of sports and media differs from that of media corporations, being more of a "backward integration" of corporations acquiring product to use on distribution and exhibition channels. The authors connect this difference with a good explanation of the factors that often led to the failure of such arrangements. The complexity of already existing sports rights on regional, national and local levels, the lack of global media viability of U.S. baseball teams, and public labor disputes in baseball all contributed to difficulties with the vertical integration of media and major league ball teams.

Walker and Bellamy include the minor leagues in their analysis, providing an inclusive picture of sport and media. A section dealing with the impact of the various media arrangements on the minor leagues destroys some familiar mythologies relating to the "death" of the minors, which in popular journalism is often attributed to the spread of media coverage of the majors. Walker and Bellamy point out that television had little effect upon the minors until the middle of the 1950s. In fact, the teams that declined most rapidly were small town teams with little television penetration (218). The authors consider Minor League Baseball to be in its "golden era" now, with attendance at an all time high. (218) Since the ramifications of revenue sharing ripple out from MLB to the farm teams, it's critical to understand how media affects them, for these farm teams provide the training ground for future major league stars who play a crucial role in the ongoing value of media rights to games.

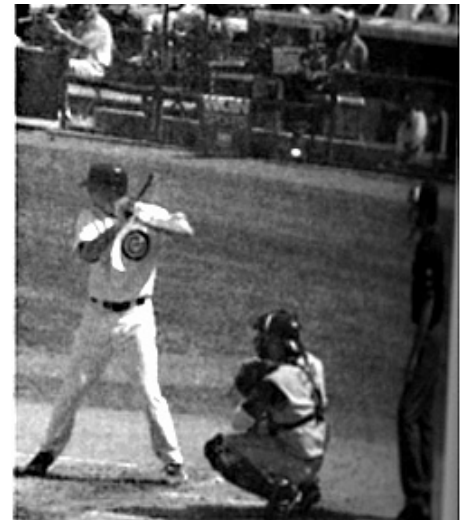
Arrangement of HD cameras at recent Chicago Cubs game in Wrigley Field.



Lower deck third base camera



Camera in upper deck above home plate.



Lower first base camera

## Culture and mythologies

Several key themes of the book situate baseball and media's entwined economic history within broader cultural histories. The book seeks to explain how the twin institutions of baseball and media give rise to certain mythologies. These links are a welcome addition to the economic cause-and effect-sequences I outlined here; however, the book is somewhat inconsistent in its treatment of cultural issues. The book develops some points very well, such as the exploration of various ways that baseball owners and, occasionally, politicians consider new technologies as a threat to established institutions like baseball. In addition to concerns over broadcast rights and licensing, the owners used public complaints about filming for broadcast to exert control over their teams on television. Not only did owners fear the loss of gate receipts if games were televised, they also claimed to fear that a telephoto lens would allow the opposing team to steal signals, and that certain camera framings disrupted the viewers' established notions of what baseball should look like.

Walker and Bellamy clearly connect these claims to the widespread suspicion that improved technology would make broadcasts "better than being there" and thus would impact attendance. Social shifts complicated this fear in the post World War II era, when ballparks shifted to the suburbs to accommodate the middle class' outward flight. The ballparks were rebuilt in locations away from public transportation and closer to cheap land that could accommodate mega-stadiums with enormous parking lots. Although the authors identify these relations, they offer only a cursory analysis that ignores contradictions.

The book explores how baseball mythologies, such as the sport's responsibility to its fans and about the public's nostalgia for a mythical, "pure" sport of the past inform current public debates about the league



Cubs' announcers watch their HD monitors





Upper deck camera covering first base

cartel. The authors give examples of ways that politicians use baseball, or any sport, as a valence issue, pointing out that baseball is an issue on which politicians can appeal to populist ideas without really doing anything about the status of major league baseball's legalized cartel.(251) The book also raises interesting points relating 1980s nostalgia myths surrounding baseball to Reagan era politics, but again this point remains largely undeveloped.

On the other hand, book clarifies instances in which cultural logic of certain strategic commercial choices, such as the expansion of minor league baseball after World War II, contradicts market logic. Given that the book's project is primarily stated as an economic history, perhaps it is inevitable that cultural issues will receive less space. It would have been more useful if the authors had expanded their argument about ways that baseball and media utilized mythologies to propose and sell certain cartel actions to Congress and to the public. Such actions in turn, helped smooth the way for baseball to keep its unique antitrust status. The discrete examples they give are interesting, but a more detailed argument on this point would greatly strengthen this history project.

The sport's significant cultural positioning helps us understand how the business of baseball maintains the illusion of being vital to the public interest in an era when stadium seating, for example, is clearly priced for corporate box owners. To cite one example, this coming year, the New York Yankee will command \$800,000 for such a box. The authors published the book before that Yankees' figure became available, and therefore they could not discuss this development. However, their historical economic analysis allows us to understand how the complex interplay of public mythologies about television and the sport combine with actual media revenues combine to enable Major League owners to reap maximum profits from seating.

Despite the limited amount of attention given to cultural issues surrounding economic arrangements, *Center Field Shot* will help cultural analysts gain a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which baseball and media corporations negotiate their relations in an era of global media convergence. Walker and Bellamy understand the media limitations upon a sport that lacks the global appeal of soccer, and the book reminds us that even in the broadband era with its multiple viewing options, there is the possibility that the baseball-saturated fan will simply switch off America's pastime.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Musical interruptions and global connections — making meaning with Bollywood music far from home

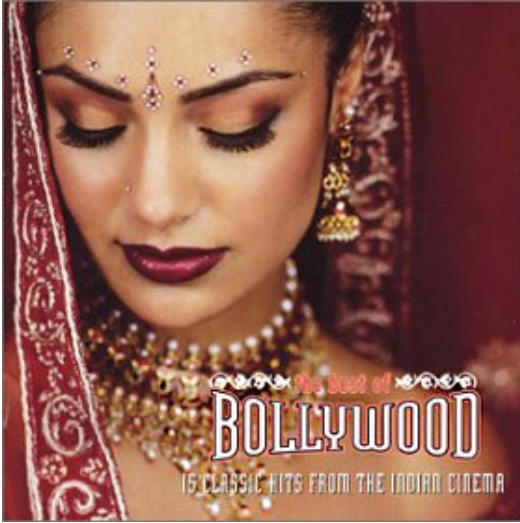
by [Neha Kamdar](#)

*Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance.* Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti (ed.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 352 pages. \$25

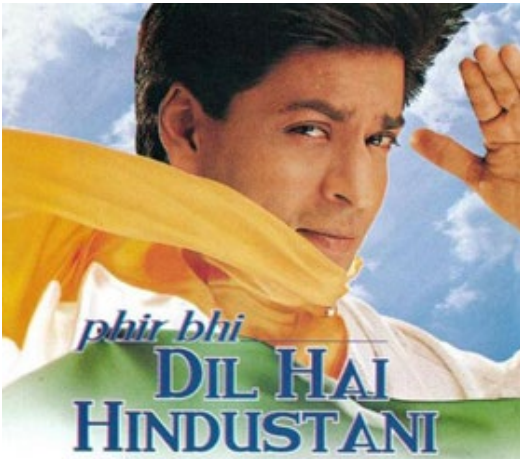
The back cover of this anthology on Bollywood song-and-dance draws attention to Indian film studies as a rapidly developing area. While it is true that an interest in cinema from India – Bollywood or not – has rapidly emerged within film studies, it is striking how little and how recently this interest has developed. It is striking because of the manic popularity of Bollywood films globally, due perhaps to the ability of Bollywood's global audience to separate their viewing experiences from any possible contemplation or comprehension of the cultural difference Bollywood represents. A big part of Bollywood's appeal lies in this very difference – it allows the films to be consumed as exotic.

Thus I find it interesting and exciting to read an anthology that takes as its subject of analysis the single most "exotic" and culturally specific aspect of Bollywood – the song-and-dance sequence. Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti have compiled essays by film, cultural and literary theorists from India and across the world about, as the book's subtitle puts it, the travels of Hindi song-and-dance.

In their introduction, Gopal and Moorti take time to demarcate Bollywood's specific terrain. Given that India has many small and large film industries that are often culturally very different from one another, this kind of beginning is frequently used as an opening rhetorical strategy by scholars writing on film from India. Gopal and Moorti then spend some time defining the phenomenon of song-and-dance, or *filmigiti* as they call it, providing a certain amount of historical and cultural context. The most important point made in the introduction is to indicate the various ways in which Bollywood in general, and *filmigiti* in particular, interact with globalization. Gopal and Moorti identify three different modes of global interaction with Bollywood song-and-dance: "metropolitan, diasporic, and subaltern." These modes define the book's overall structure of the book, as the essays are divided thematically according to the three patterns of global interaction.



Indian film music is unique in that it is marketed independent of the film itself, both in India and abroad.



The title song of the 2000 film *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* has been used by a national political party in its campaign.



The oneiric expression of forbidden love in *Dil Se* (1998).



A still from a song in *Singh is King* (2008), shot in Egypt. On the cusp of global and Indian, Bollywood often chooses foreign locales for the shooting of its song-and-dance sequences.

These three sections are entitled *Home Terrains*, *Eccentric Orbits* and *Planetary Consciousness*. *Home Terrains* starts off with three essays that frame the anthology's main premise – that song-and-dance has a life independent from the film in which it originally appeared – in a detailed socio-historical context. In this light, Anna Morcom, in her essay on the commercial life of Hindi film songs, attempts to answer the following questions:

"What is the nature of the film songs' commercial power, and how is it related to, or independent from Hindi films? Do songs sell films or do films sell songs? Songs are currently used to market the parent films, but how are the songs themselves marketed? How has the commercial life of film music been affected by the advent of cassettes, videos, compact disks (CDs), video CDs (VCDs), digital video disks (DVDs), satellite television and the Internet?"

Morcom's essay, along with those by Biswarup Sen, and Nilanjana Bhattacharya and Monika Mehta, extensively trace the evolution of song-and-dance in Bollywood. While Morcom traces the growth of the film music industry in India beginning with the advent of sound film, Sen discusses the development of Bollywood film song, pointing out how *filmigita* incorporates musical styles from the world over, thus developing a

"structure of feeling that is emphatically transnational. Bollywood song, along with Bollywood film, is thus an art form that not only functions as an expression of Indian modernity but at the same time exceeds the limits of the nation-state and contributes to the making of global culture."

Bhattacharya and Mehta make the first detailed, explicit connections between the historiography traced out in the first two essays and postcoloniality and the ideology of the State. Their essay "investigates how the Indian state uses film music to define its own citizens and national identity." It then proceeds to discuss

"how the world music industry questions and reformulates these definitions to propose its own visions of an India freed from its moorings in the nation-state."

In several ways, this chapter takes up most of the anthology's themes. For example, much of film studies in India in the 90s discussed Bollywood in the context of the ideology of the postcolonial state, nation-building and the construction of the ideal citizen-subject. Bhattacharya and Mehta take these theoretical frameworks further, applying them to Bollywood's song-and-dance sequence. What's more they consider the "travels" of these song-and-dance sequences, broaching the question of the potential modes of global interaction mentioned by the editors in the introduction – metropolitan, diasporic and subaltern.

The next essay in the section, by Shanti Kumar, discusses the "transnational economy of film production" with the establishment of





Inul, one of the leading Dangdut stars, in performance.



The performance of Bollywood outside India is no longer restricted to diasporic Indians. Several dance schools...

the Ramoji Film City in Hyderabad in southern India. Kumar points out that Ramoji Film City is said to be the biggest film studio/post-production site of its kind in the world. It prides itself in being a one-stop shop for filmmakers, who only need to turn up with a script. Everything else is available at Ramoji Film City. While this essay provides an interesting and perhaps important cultural study about Indian film production in general, given the very specific theme of this anthology, I struggled to find a reason for why it was included. However, the last chapter in the section aptly picks up from where Bhattacharya and Mehta left off.

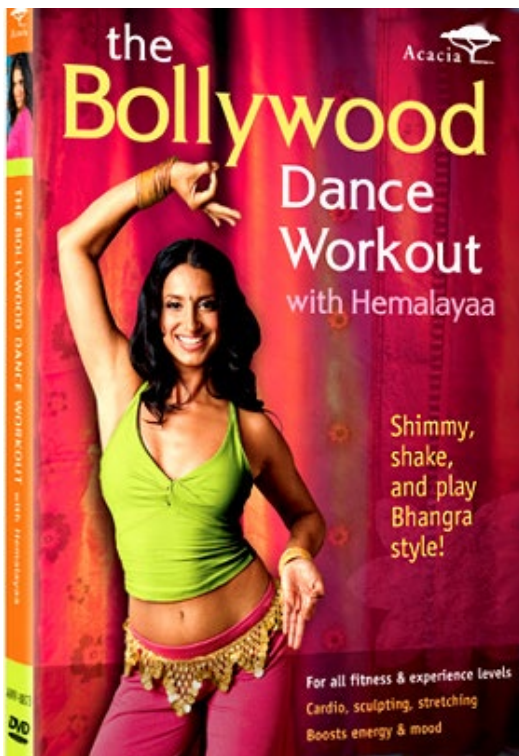
Anustup Basu, in "The Music of Intolerable Love," analyzes "political conjugality" in Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se* (1998). *Dil Se* is a prototypical film for the kind of postcolonial/ideological analysis common in the 90s, replete with direct representations of the nation-state, the threat of the Other, and the conception of the ideal male citizen-subject. Basu takes Lalitha Gopalan's reading of Bollywood cinema as a cinema of interruptions, where "song and dance sequences work as a delaying device." Basu analyzes the song-and-dance sequences in *Dil Se* as expressions of forbidden love. His formulation of these sequences as alternative spaces to the film's main storyline is intriguing and provocative.

The second part of the book, *Eccentric Orbits*, deals with the journeys that Bollywood song-and-dance takes outside India. The three chapters in this section deal with mutations of *filmigiti* as seen in Indonesia, Egypt and Israel. Bettina David, in her chapter on *dangdut* music in Indonesia, discusses the evolution of the *dangdut* genre and its close relation to Bollywood music. She defines *dangdut* as

"a hybrid pop music extremely popular among the lower classes that incorporates musical elements from Western pop, Hindi film music, and indigenous Malay tunes."

Quite like Bollywood music in India, though, *dangdut* has become the site for negotiating what David calls "globalizing modernities" in a rapidly changing and westernizing Indonesian society.





... teach what is believed to be the Bollywood style of dancing.



Stage performances of this diasporic style hit big time with Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Bombay Dreams* (2002).

In another chapter, Walter Armbrust traces the presence of India, specifically Bollywood, in Egypt. Working through layers of historical and cultural interactions between the two countries, Armbrust indicates different ways in which Egyptian culture has used Bollywood for defining the Other, and through it, the self. In the third chapter in this section, Ronie Parciack describes the use of Bollywood music in commercials – political or non-political – in Israel. While this chapter asks more questions than it answers, it is an important one because it goes into the details of what the essays on Indonesia and Egypt suggest, and what I believe lies at the heart of understanding the uses of Bollywood music in other non-western countries. In the three examples presented in this book, or in the famous *Chutney Soca* music of the Caribbean, or in a Bollywood song-and-dance performance I witnessed in Thailand once that completely took me by surprise, what emerges as a commonality is the fact that Bollywood music negotiates cultural gaps and differences in modernizing, non-western societies that are straddling native traditions and globalization. Bollywood itself, in many ways, stands at the cusp of global/western/modern and Indian/eastern/traditional. In this way, it provides fertile grounds for cultural negotiations in numerous non-Western societies.

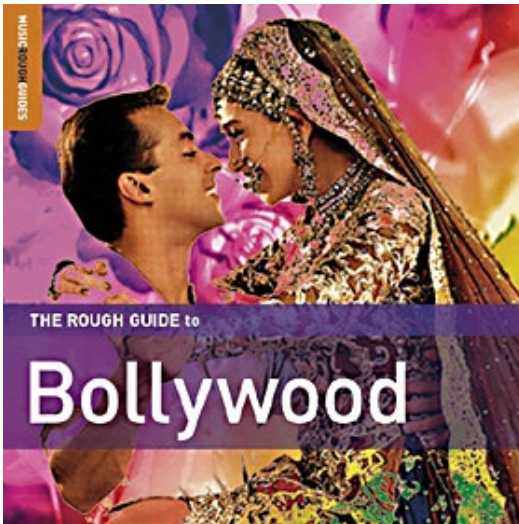
Part three, *Planetary Consciousness*, echoes some of the themes of part two, except in this case, the perspectives come from young, diasporic Indians. The overall question is similar – how does a person who finds herself caught between two opposing cultures and identities use Bollywood song-and-dance to negotiate these? The person, in this case, is the second or third generation diasporic Indian, and the opposing cultural identities are the traditional values learnt at home and the Western sensibilities imbibed through the host culture. [See also "[Nagina: Conversations with a Snake](#)" by Anandam P. Kavoori and Christina Joseph, *Jump Cut* no 43, July 2000] Sangita Shresthova addresses these questions in her chapter on the performance of Bollywood song-and-dance by south Asian-American (or *desi*) students in the Unites States. She correctly points out that

“the proliferation of Bollywood dance is most prominent outside India, where its study and performance is fast becoming an expression of Indian identity and an emergent marginal chic.”

The stage for the performance of song-and-dance becomes the stage where crises of identity and sexuality are played out. Rajinder Dudrah asks similar questions in his chapter, albeit from a completely different perspective. While his essay is also about the negotiation of identity, he discusses the possibility of queering Bollywood. Homoeroticism in Bollywood has always been something that is only hinted at by film scholars, and Dudrah, in this essay as well as in his book, is among the first to discuss it explicitly and in depth. The points Durdah makes in this essay are, first, that a queer reading of Bollywood makes possible a negotiation between Indian conservatism and sexual orientation. Second, he believes that queer readings of Bollywood do not always have to be made consciously, and that often enough, Bollywood cinema provides enough material in an otherwise heteronormative romance for



*Dostana* (2008) is among the few Bollywood films that even bothers to address possibilities outside heterosexuality. Even with this film, however, one feels cheated as the two male characters, played by John Abraham (left) and Abhishek Bachchan (right) are only pretending to be gay.



Bollywood is marketed to western and diasporic Indian audiences in several ways, such as this garishly packaged "Rough Guide."

queer readings.

Edward K. Chan's essay, on the connection between the marketing of food and film music to a western audience is another essay that made me wonder why it was a part of this section. Its inclusion in the anthology, however, may be justified, as it is an interesting study of the cultural economy of exotic food and music. Finally, the last essay in the anthology, by Richard Zumkhawala-Cook, is about the intersection of hip hop and bhangra and the racial politics surrounding the two musical genres. This is an essay steeped in the politics of U.S. ties with south Asia, the history of racism, narratives of Orientalism, and a common progressive strain in both hip hop and bhangra. As Zumkhawala-Cook puts it,

"Young people of the Indian diaspora in the United States construct grassroots networks of collective affiliation and affect by linking antiestablishment and progressive codes of African American identity with Bollywood or classical Indian aesthetic structures."

Film theory coming out of India has produced abundant scholarship that closely analyzes the ideology of Bollywood cinema. Throughout the 90s especially, film scholars like Madhav Prasad, Ashish Rajadhyaksha (both of whom are cited several times in this anthology), and Tejaswini Niranjana wrote extensively about the creation of pan-Indian identities, the hegemony of the nation-state, and the implicit and explicit gender biases of Bollywood cinema. This work is very valuable, but remains more critical than appreciative of popular culture. An important part of understanding any cinema fully is not only to dissect it ideologically, but also to try to explain the reasons for its mass appeal. One of the main reasons why this anthology is welcome is because it ventures into territory few have bothered with previously. Dudrah's essay is a good example of a new kind of interrogation. As I mentioned earlier, few film scholars have taken up queer readings of Bollywood. While I'm not convinced of the final point Dudrah makes about Bollywood answering the call for queer readings by consciously providing material for it – it is only very recently that Bollywood films have begun explicitly acknowledging homosexuality – his essay is invaluable in the avenues it opens for possible alternative readings and queer studies of Bollywood.

Admittedly, not all the questions raised by these essays have been answered. Some of the attempts at explaining the presence of Bollywood song-and-dance in strange lands seem tentative. But the book remains important for its overall treatment of *filmigiti*. The socio-historical context provided in the first part is spot on and essential for anyone aspiring to study not only *filmigiti* but also Bollywood cinema in general. The discussions in parts two and three are thoughtful, current and provocative. Overall, the anthology makes a significant contribution to the development of Indian film scholarship.





---

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).

As this poster shows, Bollywood music and dance is often a part of club events in the US and UK.

### From “centripetal” to “centrifugal” trauma: history and representation in modern China

by [Li Zeng](#)

*A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*  
by Michael Berry (New York: Columbia University Press. 2008),  
432 pp, \$45.

Starting with shocking images of Lingchi, a pre-modern state-sanctioned form of torture, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* immediately makes it clear that this book will not be light reading. Focusing on five historical traumatic events, plus a Coda that discusses the 1997 Hong Kong handover, Michael Berry gives an extensive survey of literary and visual representations of modern Chinese atrocities. Each of the five chapters focuses on one specific event: the 1930 Musha Incident, the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, the 2/28 Incident (1947), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the June Fourth Event in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The book illustrates how literature and film (re)imagine and (re)construct history, and how a reconstructed history has been shaped by the struggle among different ideologies and political agendas across historical phases.

The five events are examined in chronological order and, more significantly, in terms of the nature of trauma. Appropriating Bakhtin's terms, Berry divides trauma into “centripetal” (or “official”) trauma and “centrifugal” (or “unofficial”) trauma.

“The centripetal force of trauma begins on the outside and converges in the center, resulting in new ‘official’ or ‘national’ discourses, whereas the centrifugal force originates from this new ‘national center’ and extends outward, unleashing a multitude of destabilizing ‘unofficial’ narratives—a true heteroglossia—that stretch, challenge, and destroy national boundaries.” (7)

The first three chapters, on the Musha Incident, the Nanjing Massacre, and the 2/28 Incident, are discussed in Part I, Centripetal Trauma, while the other two chapters, addressing the Cultural Revolution and the June Fourth Event, are in Part II, Centrifugal Trauma. The structure of the book emphasizes the shift from foreign-inflicted trauma to state-imposed trauma, and from



“national” discourses to counter-discourses.

This categorization to some degree simplifies historical representations and downplays conflicts and contentions. For instance, literary and cinematic approaches to the 2/28 Incident can be “official” or “national” discourses as well as destabilizing “unofficial” narratives depending on whether the nationalist party is regarded as a foreign power or an internal force and on the point of view from which the history is reconstructed. Nevertheless, the structure is a strong feature of the book as the five chapters are connected by the common themes of nation, trauma, and history, rather than standing simply as independent units. The structure distinguishes Berry’s approach from other books on Chinese trauma literature and cinema, such as Yomi Braester’s *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China* and Ban Wang’s *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*.<sup>[1]</sup> [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

The book is ambitious in its range, covering literature and films produced between the 1930s and the present. Its significance also lies in the diversity and scope of the texts it reviews, including works from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese Diaspora and Western artists. Thus the book provides both a comprehensive survey and multiple perspectives to illustrate the conflicting ways that history is reconstructed and renegotiated.

Chapter One examines representations of the 1930 Musha Incident in literature, film, television, and photography, spanning several decades. The incident refers to the Atayal tribe’s attack on Japanese occupants in Musha, Taiwan on October 27, 1930. The Japanese responded with a massive campaign to hunt down and suppress the uprising, and the surviving Atayal were interred in detention centers. On April 24, 1931, the pro-Japanese Toda sub-tribe attacked the detention centers and killed 216 detainees, 101 of whom were decapitated. While the Toda tribe’s betrayal is largely left out of history writing, the Atayal tribe’s uprising—the indigenous people’s resistance—has been incorporated into national history and reconfigured within the context of Taiwanese nationalism.

Berry argues that both nationalist and communist rhetoric have highlighted the “Chineseness” the Musha Incident. Chen Chieh-jen’s digital manipulation of a historic photo of the incident is a typical visual example of the Chinese intrusion into the indigenous history. Chen reworks the photograph, which shows 101 decapitated heads displayed along the ground with a crowd of hunters sitting in the background, by inserting a partly dismembered Han Chinese (Chen Chieh-jen himself) in the center. Berry makes a strong argument that this textual intervention introduces a visceral notion of physical suffering absent from the original photo, and is

“an allegorical performance of the ways Chinese discourse has intruded into indigenous discourse, in some cases making itself the central object of violence.” (82)

Berry emphasizes the shift in discourse on national identity that is reflected in representation of the Musha Incident. Taiwanese writers and artists have used

the Incident in their works to strengthen the Taiwan-centric historical positioning of the event and articulate a distinctly Taiwanese historical experience as opposed to the nostalgic “Chinese” historical vision in government-sponsored Mandarin films. Examples of these films include He Jiming’s *Bloodshed on the Green Mountains* (1957) and Hong Xinde’s *Disturbance in Musha* (1965). Berry observes that more recent Taiwanese rewriting of the Musha Incident has been affected by the change in political leadership from the “pro-mainland” Nationalist party to the “pro-independence” Democratic Progressive Party. Berry illustrates his point by describing a television miniseries based on Deng Xiangyang’s book *Dana Sakura: The True Musha Incident and the Story of Hanaoka Hatsuko* (2006), and an album, *Seediq Bale* (2005), by the Taiwan progressive heavy metal band ChthoniC. While criticizing the simplification of the incident in Taiwanese popular culture, Berry affirms that with these popular cultural representations

“a new set of Taiwan-centric historical narratives to support the new political line, a new Taiwanese historical subjectivity that could stand separate from the Mainland Chinese master narratives of cultural unity began to emerge.” (94)

Chapter Two is a survey of literary and cinematic works dealing with the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, in which invading Japanese troops slaughtered the residents of Nanjing. This chapter focuses on form and style and explores the relationship between history and representation. Berry compares three films, *Massacre in Nanjing* (Luo Guanqun, 1987), *Black Sun: The Nanjing Massacre* (T. F. Mou, 1995), and *Don’t Cry, Nanking* (Wu Ziniu, 1995), and extols Wu’s film for its depth, complexity, and characterization. Nevertheless, Berry faults the three films for failing to develop beyond the discourse of “evidence” and historical authenticity. The line between fact and fiction is not always absolute and the assumption that the primary function of a history film is to preserve a “true past” undermines the film’s creative and reflective scope. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the Nanjing Massacre films and their reception in the political context of Japan’s denial of the massacre. Burdened by the responsibility to prove “it did happen,” these films are examples of how political and social contexts shape historical discourses.

In his survey of literary works, Berry focuses on Ah Long’s *Nanjing* (1939) and Ye Zhaoyan’s *Nanjing 1937: A Love Story* (1996). In addition to experimenting with narrative structure, Ah Long’s novel takes a humanistic approach, suggesting that “the true enemy is not the Japanese but rather the enemy within.”(149) Similarly, *Nanjing 1937: A Love Story* portrays Chinese-Chinese violence during the Nanjing Massacre, which Berry views as a “footnote to a century of violent political movements, state insurrections, purges, and atrocities at the hands of their own people.”(166) Berry argues that both novels achieve critical depth by subverting the simplistic binary narrative, but his evaluation is based on the criterion of even-handed portrayal, which is problematic in its failure to acknowledge the political perspective of anti-colonial discourses. Discussing *The Battle of Algiers*, Mike Wayne argues that rather than being “impartial,” Third Cinema “would want to point the finger.”[2] In the case of the Nanjing Massacre, an atrocity

imposed by a colonial power, “pointing the finger” at the colonizer may empower rather than weaken the anti-colonial text. Berry’s emphasis on Chinese against Chinese violence throughout his book to a certain degree limits the book’s critical engagement with theories of Third World cinema and literature.

Chapter Three examines literary and cinematic representation of the 2/28 Incident, the local Taiwanese uprising against the Nationalist Party’s discriminatory rule on February 28, 1947. The uprising was shortly suppressed by the military. Berry illustrates how the cultural sentiment for defining and redefining Taiwanese identity has impacted the reconstruction of the 2/28 Incident in literature and film. While early works, such as Wu Zhuoliu’s *The Fig Tree* (1967) and Li Qiao’s *Record of Taimu Mountain* (1984), emphasize the victimization of Taiwanese people and the cultural resistance against the Nationalist Party’s control of historical narrative, representation in the post-martial law era representation is characterized by introspective depth and reflective quality. For instance, Chen Ye’s *Muddy River* (1990) and Li Ang’s *The Strong Garden* (1990) interweave personal narratives and history, and they provide multiple perspectives denied by traditional historical narratives; Yang Zhao’s short story “Fireworks” (1987) expresses optimism rather than “victimization” and his “Dark Souls” (1993) breaks the tradition of realism by including supernatural elements and reaching beyond the bounds of history.

In his discussion on cinematic representation in Chapter Three, Berry focuses on Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *City of Sadness* (1989) and Lin Cheng-sheng’s *March of Happiness* (1999). While affirming the importance of both films, Berry considers Hou’s film a more developed meditation on violence that achieves greater historical impact. He studies the nonlinear structure, linguistic diversity, vast array of characters, and use of cinematic techniques in Hou’s film, and demonstrates how its form and style powerfully convey pain and sadness.

Chapter Four is a survey of literature, films and television dramas about the rustification of educated youth (*zhi qing*) during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Selecting from the huge number of publications and films on the Cultural Revolution and the *zhiqing* movement, Berry chooses to focus on the educated youths who were sent down to Yunnan province in 1968. Far from limiting the scope of his survey, this focus provides new perspectives on the discourse of trauma, that is, on the popular representation of the rustification movement and its traumatic impact on the younger generation. Berry discusses Wang Xiaobo’s novel *The Golden Age* (1992), film adaptations of Ah Cheng’s *King of the Children*, *King of Chess* (1990), and several television miniseries, such as *The Wages of Sin* (1994) and *Midnight Sunlight* (2005).

*The Wages of Sin* revolves around five children who come to Shanghai to look for their parents, who abandoned them when they left Yunnan. Berry argues that this television series suggests a haunted past underlying the educated-youth characters’ exile and the belated return of the nightmare. *Midnight Sunlight* is a popular romance television serial drama. Among many twists in the plot, the most dramatic is the male protagonist’s discovery that his bride

may be his sister, whom his mother, an *ex-zhiqing*, abandoned in Yunnan before returning to Shanghai. Even though in the end it turns out that the couple has no kinship connection, the male protagonist dies of cancer at their wedding. Berry affirms the significance of the so-called “low-brow” cultural form:

“Beyond the seemingly superficial and contrived narrative conventions of this miniseries lurks a more serious attempt to articulate a post-traumatic pain that finally comes raging out.”  
(292-3)

Furthermore, Berry addresses the “global dimensions” of past violence. For instance, *Midnight Sunlight* traces the journey of the educated youth from Yunnan to Shanghai and then overseas; *Tou Du* (2003), another popular television serial drama, deals with former educated-youth characters in the United State.

Chapter Five is the highlight of the book. It is the most comprehensive study produced thus far on literary and cinematic responses to the June Fourth Event, the Chinese government’s crackdown of the student demonstration at Tiananmen Square, which still remains a taboo topic in China. Berry first discusses works by Chinese writers who immigrated to the West after 1989, such as Hong Ying’s *Summer of Betrayal* (1997) and Beijing Comrade’s on-line novel *Lan Yu* (2001). These works use body politics to battle state politics. In *Summer of Betrayal*, which traces the fate of a female student and her circle of intellectual, artist, and reporter friends after the June Fourth Event, sex becomes a political site of resistance to the state’s violence:

“During a time when everything, including even words, is controlled and dictated by the state, the individual is slowly stripped of all her cultured resources of defense, rebellion, and speech until all that is left is the biological self. In the end, sex is her only weapon.” (313)

Berry then discusses four documentaries, *Sunless Days* (Shu Kei, 1990), *Moving the Mountain* (Michael Apted, 1994), *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (Carma Hinton, 1995), and *Sunrise Over Tiananmen* (Shui-Bo Wang, 1998). Berry regards *Sunrise Over Tiananmen* as the most fascinating documentary exploration of the June Fourth Event. There are two features of this film that Berry finds compelling. First, it interweaves historical events and a highly personal narrative. Wang combines family photos with archival images and his own paintings with images of Mao. Thus Wang “is able to address a complex combination of historical forces and ideological conflicts in a lucid and personal narrative.” (328) *Sunrise Over Tiananmen* also documents almost all the tumultuous events of modern Chinese history, from the Long March and the Second Sino-Japanese War, to the mass famine of the Great Leap Forward and the June Fourth Event. By linking the June Fourth Event with the previous traumatic events, Berry argues that the film provides “the massive social, historical, and philosophical dimensions of the incident.” (328) But it should be noted that Berry’s evaluation of the documentaries is to some degree biased by his view of China as the site of continuous trauma and atrocity, the overriding theme of the book.



In the last section of Chapter Five, Berry discusses narrative films made within China, which he divides into two groups according to the strategies they employ to deal with the June Fourth Event: those that directly portray the incident and its aftermath, such as *Lan Yu* (Stanley Kwan, 2001), *Conjugation* (Emily Tang, 2002), and *Summer Palace* (Lou Ye, 2006); and those that render the incident “through allegory, invisibility, and the politics of disappearance” (329), such as *Fatal Decision* (Yu Benzheng, 2000). Berry gives an in-depth analysis of Lou Ye’s *Summer Palace* and highlights the way the film interweaves the trauma of the event and the tragic lives of the people involved in it. His discussion on the construction of the space of trauma is particularly thought-provoking. *Summer Palace* includes conspicuous changes of location: the female protagonist leaves Tumen for Beijing before the June Fourth Event; and the male protagonist and two other main characters leave Beijing for Berlin after the crackdown; the male protagonist return to Beijing in the end while another character commits suicide in Berlin. Berry makes an insightful comment on the symbolic meaning of Berlin:

“Berlin can be seen as a double, or at least alternate, identity for Beijing...the characters’ journey to Berlin can be seen as a means of retroactively realizing their dreams of liberal democracy and seeing their idealistic revolution succeed...or is it?” (346)

Berry calls attention to the interaction between space, identity, and trauma.

Berry’s analysis of *Fatal Decision*, a popular mainstream film which makes no direct reference to the June Fourth Event, is interesting, although I do not necessarily agree with his argument that the June Fourth incident “remains an implicit subtext behind the story.” (351) He compares the scene of the factory workers’ protest in this film to the student protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989:

“The entire scene is reminiscent of June Fourth, and can also be seen as a conscious attempt to revisit the incident and belatedly reconfigure that past.” (352).

In this scene, the protagonist, a high governmental official, shows his understanding and patience to the workers and makes efforts to solve their problems. Berry reads the scene as the government’s fictional attempt to reevaluate history. In his words,

“*Fatal Decision* presents a concerted efforts to address—and redress—June Fourth without ever actually having to mention the subject. In the context of popular culture, the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] reinvents itself as a regime that does not slaughter students in the middle of the night, but instead labors the night through to maintain peace with the people. Leaders are not dismissive but sensitive, and social unrest is not violently quelled but gently pacified.” (352)

Though one may disagree with this analysis of films like *Fatal Attraction* as the CCP’s reconfiguration of the June Fourth Event, it is easy to read

propagandistic films that praise the government's efforts to deal with corruption as the official culture's response to the anti-corruption sentiment during and after the June Fourth Event.

Berry concludes his book with a brief discussion of works relating to the 1997 Hong Kong handover, which adds to the existing scholarship on this event. Using the five traumatic events and the recent Hong Kong handover, *A History of Pain* consistently presents the "evolving chain of events and representations" of trauma in modern Chinese history. The book is significant for its extensive survey of the discourse of trauma, its cross-disciplinary approach (covering literature, film, television, and photography), its wide range of texts from inside and outside China, and its diverse perspectives. Although sometimes Berry makes disputable comments in passing, the book achieves a substantial degree of critical engagement by providing insightful analysis of important texts, which lifts it above the level of a mere historical survey.

## Notes

1. Braester, Yomi. *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003. Wang, Ban. *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004. [[return to text](#)]

2. Wayne, Mike. "Third Cinema as Critical Practice: A Case Study of *The Battle of Algiers*," in *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*. London: Pluto Press, 2001. P.13.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



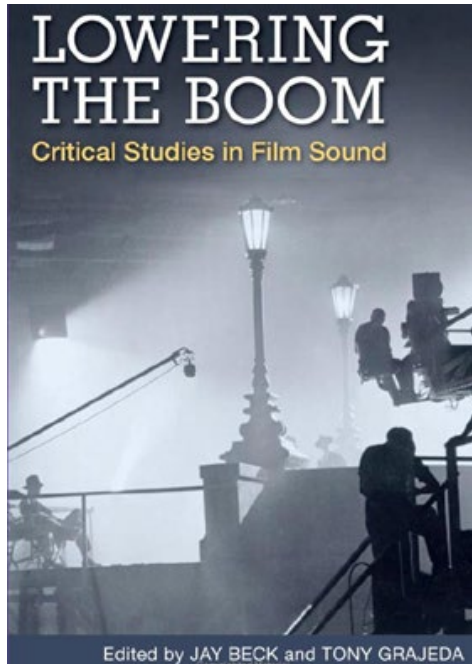
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Raising questions by "lowering the boom"

review by [Mark Kerins](#)



The images below illustrate some of the ideas from this book.

*Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*. Edited by Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

It has become something of a cliché for aurally-inclined media scholars to bemoan film studies' marginalization of sound. Yet for those wondering whether sound would ever get its due recognition as crucial to the experience of cinema, the past few years have offered hope. A number of new music and sound-oriented journals are now available and publishers seem to be releasing more books in this area than ever before. Furthermore, the Society for Cinema and Media Studies now has an official "Sound Studies" interest group, thanks in large part to the editors of the collection reviewed here, whose meeting at the last SCMS conference met with standing room only. Indeed, in their introduction to the new essay collection *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*, editors Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda take an optimistic tone about the state of "sound" as an object of critical study, noting that

"the subject has most certainly arrived, and this notable shift over the past decade places sound at the vanguard of academic discourse" (2).

If sound has in fact "arrived," that is partly because scholars in so many different areas with a stake in one form of "sound" or another have started sharing their work across disciplinary lines, creating what may finally constitute a critical mass of academic work in this broadly-defined category. As Beck and Grajeda astutely note, recent work falling under the loose rubric of "sound studies" tackles not only motion picture sound but also pop music, radio, new media, audio technology, and cultural analysis. And as this breadth of subjects suggests, current work approaches sound from a wide array of perspectives. One of the monumental tasks this book assigns itself is to bring together these different tactics in an orderly way, to "articulate cross-disciplinary methodologies and analytical approaches" (2) in a way useful specifically to those interested in film sound. Certainly this is a worthwhile task. Paradoxically, it is this very goal that is both the book's biggest strength and its most glaring weakness.



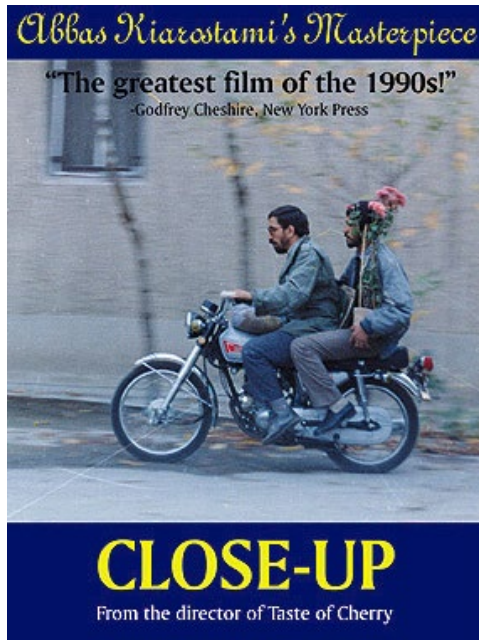
Charleton Heston playing a Mexican is but one way *Touch of Evil* addresses race.



A key element of "border-crossing" in *Touch of Evil* has to do with language. When we first meet "Pancho" he appears to speak only Spanish...



... but we later find he not only speaks English but varies his speech and accent to portray several different types of people over the phone.



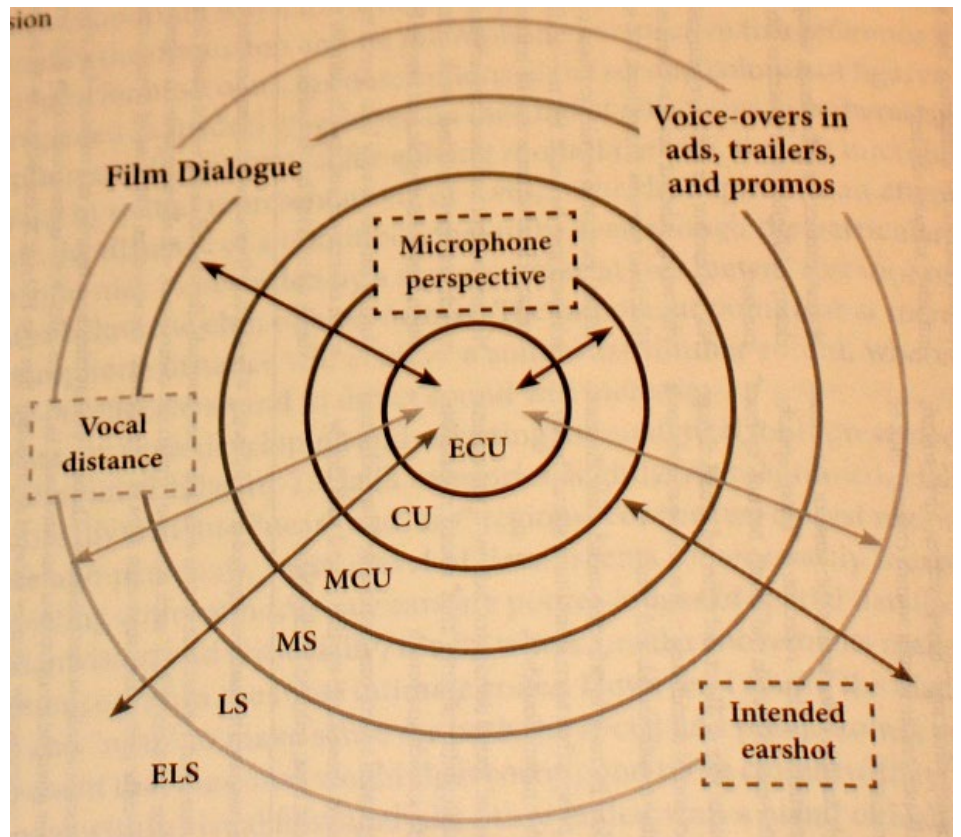
Documentary film audiences usually don't know how or how much the soundtrack they assume to be "real" is manipulated. In Kiarostami's *Close-Up*, production audio from a crucial confrontation is completely altered.

A brief overview of the book will help explain this apparent contradiction. *Lowering the Boom* offers eighteen essays, grouped into five categories such as "Historicizing Sound" and "Sound and Genre." Its authors hail from an impressive range of disciplines, including not just film but also music, English, cultural studies, and art, and collectively include a good mix of established film sound scholars (such as John Belton, Anahid Kassabian, and James Lastra) and less familiar names. The best of these essays tend to fall into two groups: those that productively reexamine seemingly familiar topics by looking at them through the lens of sound, and those that make us think about sound itself in new ways. In the former category are essays like Grajeda's, which uses a close examination of voices and dialogue in *Touch of Evil* – probably one of the most-studied films around – as an entry point to a provocative consideration of the film's use of race and border-crossing.

Similarly, David T. Johnson brings new life to the oft-discussed question of documentary ethics by arguing persuasively that the ethical considerations involved in altering sounds can be quite different from those involved in altering images, using Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* as a case-study. And as one more example, Paul Grainge follows in the footsteps of many others in looking at Hollywood industrial practices, but he takes on a heretofore unexplored corner of this world with his piece on Dolby as a brand. He demonstrates rather convincingly that Dolby's marketing has changed not just how we view that *company* and its technologies, but how we understand the concept of "going to the movies."

In the category of essays specifically about sound itself, Arnt Maasø's piece, "The Proxemics of the Mediated Voice," offers an excellent exploration of how to describe voices in television and film. Recognizing that the spatial characteristics of voices in the soundtrack come not just from the original performance but also from the microphone used, its placement, and the way it is mixed, he offers a useful scheme for characterizing voices and how they are perceived by the audience. The value of his work goes beyond this, as portions of his structure could be easily be used to describe non-dialogue elements of the soundtrack, like sound effects and music. Paul Théberge's essay, on what exactly "silence" means and its use as a structuring device, is another piece that should prove useful for anyone really interested in thinking about how sound design functions over the course of an entire movie. Lastly, as my own interests in sound originate in multi-channel technologies, I must mention Jay Beck's essay on mixing practices during the early Dolby Stereo era, which provides a key industrial and technological context for studying sound design in any films from the last thirty years.

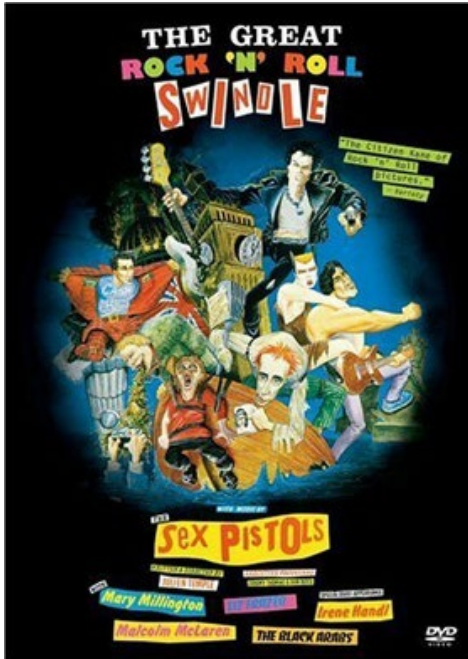




This graph gives a hint of the detailed categorization scheme Arnt Maasø proposes for thinking about "mediated" voices."

*Lowering the Boom* is refreshing in the breadth of topics it includes, as the essay descriptions above should make clear, and perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the range of films explored. Much film sound scholarship has focused on Hollywood product, and this area is not neglected. Essays examining classics like *Touch of Evil* and *Fantasia*, modern blockbusters like *Pearl Harbor* and *Saving Private Ryan*, and other studio releases (from the 1930s to the present) make up about half the book. But the other half incorporates writings on a variety of areas that have too often been ignored by sound theorists, such as documentary, experimental film, foreign cinema, and punk film.





*Lowering the Boom* has essays on an impressively broad spectrum of films, everything from the Sex Pistols' *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* to [on right] Paul Sharits's experimental work, Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, Dr. Seuss's surreal *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T*, as well as mainstream Hollywood fare.



As the editors note (16), these essays mark a conscious effort to focus attention and effort on the un- or under-explored areas Rick Altman labeled “sound’s dark corners” in the landmark 1992 collection *Sound Theory / Sound Practice*. Here it is encouraging to see new work addressing these areas, although simultaneously depressing to note how little progress has been made in addressing these “dark corners” in the sixteen years between the two books.



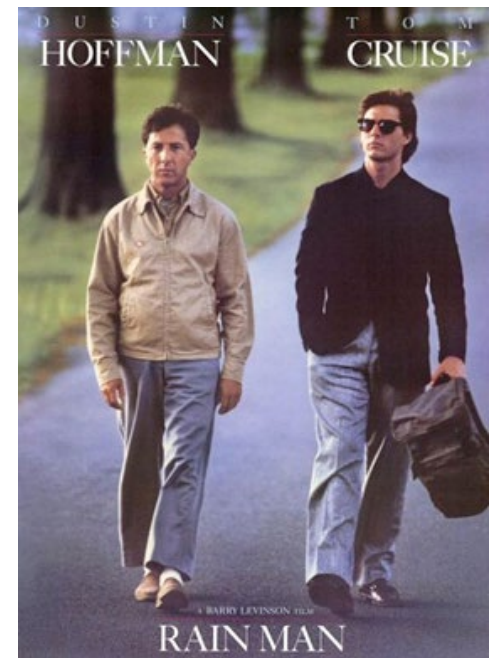
Silence is a structuring device in contemporary film and television, from a deserted island in *Cast Away* to scenes where all diegetic sound disappears, as in *Pulp Fiction* and *Rain Man* ...







... to Nicolas Cage's near heart attack in *Leaving Las Vegas*.



Nevertheless, *Lowering the Boom's* inclusive strategy also has a downside, specifically that its emphasis on showcasing different entry points into film sound comes at the expense of really pushing forward our conception of *what* that sound is. The collection deploys an array of new theoretical approaches, but it does little to augment the limited range of film sound that film studies has deemed worth of analysis. Yes, as noted above, many of the essays tackle *categories* of film often ignored by sound studies, but they do so with the same boundaries commonly seen in analyses of mainstream Hollywood film as to *what* parts of the film soundtrack to study. So sound effects, the sonic properties of the voice (with the notable exception of Maasø's piece), and most importantly the soundtrack *as a whole* are given short shrift, while music and the *text* of the dialogue — which has more to do with the *script* than with “sound” per se — take center stage.



*Silence of the Lambs* is an example of a film playing with the boundaries of what Dolby Stereo can do. When Jodie Foster's Clarice is in Buffalo Bill's house, she uses sonic cues to guide her to the kidnapped woman.



Throughout, the soundtrack places us in Clarice's aural perspective while the visuals alternate between her POV and shots watching her.



Once the lights go out, different effects on the soundtrack are used to suggest Buffalo Bill's perspective, which now alternates with Clarice's.

Fully a quarter of the essays, for instance, are about film music. Beck and Grajeda posit in the introduction that the essays on music included here take a unique approach by positioning film music “as sound.” In fact, this claim is not necessarily borne out in the essays themselves, the hardly-novel argument that sound effects and music sometimes overlap or interact notwithstanding. But even if this were true, it seems odd to devote so much of the book to a topic that even the editors admit is one of the few areas of film sound to have already received significant attention (15) when other areas have been and remain virtually ignored.



Dolby Laboratories has consistently striven to develop and maintain particular associations with its name and logo. At times Dolby has been less concerned with the specifics of various sound systems than simply promoting a link between Dolby and quality sound.



The narration in Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* calls into question the value and purpose of images like this.

To be sure, the “soundtrack” itself is not really the central concern of *Lowering the Boom*. Rather than focusing on the details of individual films’ soundtracks, as does so much sound scholarship, this is a book consciously about *theory*. As Beck and Grajeda note, many theoretical models ignore sound entirely. And even if “post-theory” is the current fashion, film sound “offers numerous possibilities for advancing, revisiting, and revising current feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, queer, and apparatus theories” (18) that were never even considered during “theory’s” heyday. In the abstract, there’s good reason to focus this book on theory. In practice, the book’s multi-disciplinary approach and short essay format make it somewhat unwieldy. The authors have little ability to build off one another and no way to ascertain which disciplines and models readers may already be familiar with. Thus, many of the essayists attempt to distill discussions of multiple theoretical frameworks, one or more films, and sound in general into a few short pages. In several essays, such extreme condensation results in writing that is provocative but raises more questions than the essay can even begin to answer. A number of other essays, meanwhile, include so many digressions that the central argument becomes difficult to follow and/or authors get bogged down in their own theoretical constructs.

I can hardly fault the book for focusing so much on theory, given Beck and Grajeda’s rock-solid rationale for this structure. Nevertheless, I wish more of the essays would have found a way to tie their theoretical concerns more tightly to solid textual analysis. Some of them accomplished this brilliantly, but too many of the essays were rather superficial in their analyses of actual movies. Certainly training is a contributing factor here, particularly for those coming from disciplines outside film. And the lack of a clear method for doing textual analysis of film sound continues to be a problem even for those who have focused on sound for some time. However, for a collection specifically on film sound, the rarity of in-depth close readings of soundtracks was surprising.

To use a simple example, Barry Mauer’s analysis of *Land Without Bread* focuses on the relation between image and narration. Analyzing the *sound* of the narrator’s voice, perhaps beginning with something like Maasø’s framework, would seem to me a crucial component of any argument about interplay between image and sound. Is the narrator’s voice skeptical or serious? Is it in the same sonic space as the onscreen world, or somewhere else? Is it given an intimate presence or does it sound like a lecture to a large group? Yet Mauer’s essay treats the voice in *Land Without Bread* as merely a conveyor of words – the equivalent of onscreen titles – rather than as a *sound*, and the rest of the soundtrack (music, effects, ambiances) is similarly ignored. If we are ever to “place sound on equal footing with the image,” (3) as Beck and Grajeda hope, we must demand the same richness in close readings of the soundtrack as we expect of those considering the image.

Of course, it is a bit unfair to expect short essays to each lay out a whole theory, apply it to sound, and analyze a film or two in depth. But this is a way in which a *little* coherence between pieces might have helped. In some cases multiple essays reiterate some of the same background, which may make them work better as stand-alone essays but proves repetitive to anyone reading the entire book. To be sure, the editors split the essays into five categories to give the reader some guidance as to overarching “themes,” but this grouping of the essays by general “topic” is a tenuous arrangement at best. And being placed in the same section does not necessarily imply any relation between two essays in methodology or topic. The book’s insightful introduction explicitly acknowledges this dilemma, laying out multiple “alternative paths” such as “authorship” and “technological change” through the book (and by extension sound studies in general), suggesting that the organizational scheme the editors have provided is hardly the only one possible, and perhaps not even the most productive depending on the particular question at hand.





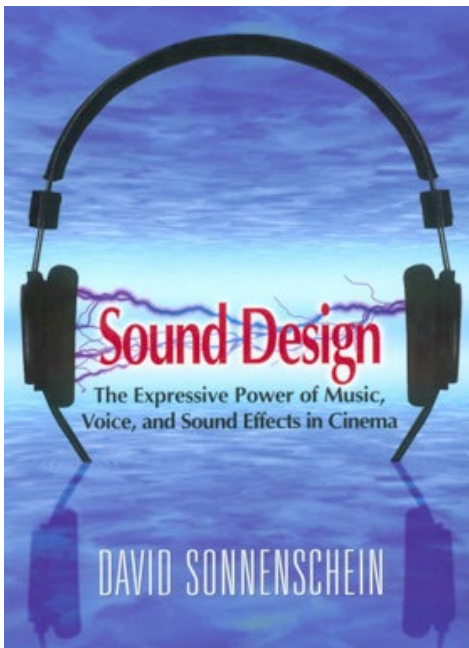
William Whittington and David Sonnenschein strive to analyze the soundtrack as a whole ...

If I have offered a mixed review here, it is because I both find the book a valuable contribution to film studies and also remain disappointed that this first book-length collection of new essays about film sound in sixteen years does not push sound studies further than it does. I was hoping for this book to be a home run and am mildly frustrated that it is merely a solid single. But I should be clear that *Lowering the Boom* is a no-brainer recommendation for anyone interested in film sound. It has several really thought-provoking essays. And given the range of methodologies and topics represented, any sound scholar is bound to find some useful new entry points to film sound as well as some familiar questions and movies discussed in new ways.

The bigger question is how useful this book might be to film scholars who have *not* thought much about sound to this point. On the one hand, its breadth of topics and strategies gives a potent demonstration that audio has a crucial role to play in virtually *every* area of film/media studies. Film scholars in all areas of research – even if they approach the book with no particular concern for sound – will likely find something relevant to their own work and worth pursuing further. On the other hand, as noted earlier the book is notably lacking in its consideration of the soundtrack as a *whole*, and I worry that this limiting view positing what “parts” of the soundtrack to study provides a dangerous entry into sound studies. Thus I might suggest a book-length study like William Whittington’s *Sound Design & Science Fiction* or even a production-oriented book like David Sonnenschein’s *Sound Design* as a better entry point for sound neophytes, as these works rely on more comprehensive conceptions of film sound.

However, cinema scholars who have focused exclusively on the filmic image and ignored its aural counterpart may not be likely to pick up Whittington or Sonnenschein’s books. Thus I hope that *Lowering the Boom*’s more theoretical bent entices them to give it a read even if it’s their first sound book. I cannot say that the book succeeds at its lofty goal of “reconceptualizing film studies to place sound on an equal footing with the image” (3) – at least not if this means bringing sound to the point where it can be considered apart from the image in the same way that image-based scholarship has often ignored the soundtrack. What the book *does* do is reclaim cinema as an “audiovisual” object, demonstrating conclusively that whatever the relative importance of the “audio” and “visual” parts, *neither* can be ignored. This is more realistic and useful way to conceptualize sound and image as pseudo-equals, and a great lesson for those who have previously neglected the soundtrack. For this “evangelical” effect alone, I hope *Lowering the Boom* is widely read, and I look forward to the increased discussion about sound and image together that it might inspire.

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 51](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



... rather than focusing on individual elements as if they operate in isolation.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).



Mark Kerins mixing sound.

## **The last word** **Racing into the Obama era**

**by the editors**

Among the hoorays and fanfare accompanying the arrival of the Obama era, we've seen a ramping up of the rhetoric and declarations that now, finally, we live in a "post-racial" era (joining apparently the already established dogma that this is a "post-feminist" era). Excuse our skepticism.

In fact, much of the race hatred that was stated in a masked way during the presidential election (calling Obama elitist or cosmopolitan, masking fear of "uppity" black men) now has been directed in a far more overt way against Sonia Sotomayor as a nominee for Supreme Court Justice. She says herself she owes educational opportunities to affirmative action. Her words then become the occasion for the right to re-frame "affirmative action" as "less qualified," as if Sotomayor's long career on the bench did not make her more qualified than most Supreme Court nominees. In addition, Sotomayor takes pride in her Latina background and understands how a different perspective in life experience can add to the richness of social understanding that a judge would bring to the bench. That commonplace of understanding is also turned into a slur, that race would influence her legal judgments. What is not acknowledged in this kind of accusation is the understanding that race does inflect the court's perspective, that rich white male justices also only see part of the picture. However, since most social discourse posits whiteness as the invisible given, that which does not need commenting on, only a person of color has to answer questions about his/her race. Barack Obama surmounted that kind of critique but Sotomayor's nomination brings back into the public eye many long-lived prejudices and fears.

In the rush to say that we don't have to think about race anymore, and that now we can dismantle the civil rights legislation which sought to change the legacy of slavery and Reconstruction, conservatives have pushed a new line: We just don't need affirmative action remedies in our laws and institutions, and we just don't need to be aware of social racism. But this argument relies on a slight of hand. It rests on pointing at what is undeniably true and easily observable. Attitudes have changed, both generally and especially generationally. Most young people are more liberal than their parents, and grandparents in terms of social attitudes. This fact,

born out in everyday observation as well as social science surveys of attitudes, is used to define racial inequality as primarily a matter of attitude. It sets the issue as a moral or psychological one. The social policy that follows is either to do nothing (the problem is taking care of itself) as political conservatives argue, or to try to change prejudice through education as political liberals argue (which the right then regards with alarm as ideological manipulation, thought control, etc.)

There is another way to look at race in the USA. That is to look at race in relation to economic exploitation. From this view race is not just a matter of beliefs and attitudes but is deeply structured into a class system in which racism is seldom open to everyday social examination. Institutional racism is expressed in unequal power and privilege. It produces poverty and discrimination and must always be understood in relation to class. Given the current economic meltdown, it is clear which groups suffer the most, be that in terms of failure of the healthcare system, housing foreclosures, and industrial unemployment. Bill Clinton's neoliberal decimation of the welfare safety net combined with moving manufacturing jobs overseas followed by George W. Bush's acceleration of market solutions to everything has finally come to judgment. Deindustrialization has had its severest effects on the old industrial cities, with Detroit as the most obvious disaster scenario.

Racial inequality is a structural condition, not a question of attitude. It is marked by economic exploitation and maintained by political and social oppression. It can be observed primarily in the uneven and unfair distribution of power and resources, particularly in housing and education. Perhaps the simplest marker is to compare the per pupil dollar amount spent on K-12 education in wealthy white suburbs and the inner cities. When this obscene differential is then ignored by proclaiming the myth of upward mobility, the insult is even more obvious. (Incidentally, upward mobility is actually higher in Western Europe than in the "free market" US.)

The Obama era does mark a change, and a possibility for change. The government does have coercive power to change policies and implementation. And litigation and regulation can challenge the status quo. But most importantly, grassroots activism plays a powerful role in change.

In a time of change, of new possibilities, of transition, the glass can always be taken as half-empty or half-full. The optimistic view argues that formal legal changes have been effective, that merit is now recognized, and that only that outmoded and dysfunctional effects keep people back. The pessimistic view declares that racism is present and well hidden but still controlling. The realistic progressive view says that we have to build on the progress already made, organize for change, and keep pushing.

John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, Julia Lesage



# Remembrance against manufactured amnesia: on the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Incident

by [David Leiwei Li](#)

History exists not because the past wishes to be excavated but because the present needs it for its self-understanding. To evoke the Tiananmen incident at considerable time and space removal from that historical trauma seems to entail an inquiry of interpretive innocence: who wish to know what and where knowing is taking place. If vision is said to be predetermined by prior experience, you see what your mind's eye directs you, recollection has a similar conditional as well as willful characteristic, you remember what you want to remember. It seems to me that in the United States the significance of the Tiananmen crackdown is already framed in a lens through which the discourse of democracy and human rights will again celebrate itself in universal triumphalism, ready to condemn once more the Chinese tragedy twenty years ago in the nineteenth century vocabulary of "Oriental despotism." Barbarism is the symptom of the Other from which the civilized modernity of a West-dominated late capitalism is immune.

I want to swim against this mainstream of common sense to suggest that the bloodshed at the Gate of Heavenly Peace, as Tiananmen is literally known in Chinese, is a watershed world-historic event that marks China's compulsory participation in and the de facto completion of the civilized liberties of today's global capitalist order. The brutal suppression of mass movements by the communist state on June 4th 1989 is succeeded by the Fall of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9th, 1989, the first Gulf War of 1990, the implosion of Soviet Union in 1991, Deng Xiaoping's tour of southern China in 1992, Hong Kong repatriation into China and the end of British colonial rule in 1997, the handover of Macao in 1999, and finally the People's Republic's entry at the end of 2001 into The World Trade Organization. In becoming the 143rd member of the WTO, China has officially reneged its history of determined "delinking" from the world system (Amin), deliberately "connected the tracks" (Jiegui) with the global market, and successfully rounds up the world picture of neoliberal capitalism, the picture of globalization as we know it, in what should be properly called "the Reagan, Thatcher, and Deng Xiaoping Revolution."

The impact of this revolution after the revolution seems a conclusion of the

long nineteenth century colonialism, or imperialism of earlier capitalist phase, that China once adamantly resisted. Now that labor and material extraction can efficiently be divorced from territorial occupation, the end of the last millennia witnessed the inauguration of a neocolonialism, or, capitalism of the neoliberal phase. In this new era of global capitalism, states world over are forsaking their citizens, Mandarins in Mao jackets are marketers and musketeers for Wall Streets, and democracy and human rights, legacies and unfulfilled promises of liberal nation-states of old, are unmoored by the radical mobility of transnational corporations and have become pieties emptied of real significance.

The massacre on the square of Heavenly Peace only paved way for the initial boom in the southern Chinese Special Economic Zones, and the massive industrialization succeeding it has turned China into the factory of the world stocking the shopping malls of the world. By recalling June 4th in this manner, I am neither advancing any conspiracy theory nor claiming a behind the scene collusion between the Chinese communist party bosses and the company bosses from EuroAmerica. But one cannot fail to observe the marriage of convenience between strange bedfellows, when the totalitarian communist bureaucracy, in its newly incarnated rational form, submits itself to the border-transcending ideology of privatization, marketization, and deregulation. As we begin to unmask the workings of “the invisible hand” since the Tiananmen incident, the conversion of state interests into capital interests or the convergence of state and capital interests for the sake of the forever-profitable economy appear to have achieved conceptual crystallization. Post-Tiananmen Chinese governance is a model of market development administered by an autocratic state. It demythologizes the faith that capitalism is a socioeconomic force conducive to the flourish of democratic institutions, free and egalitarian societies. The short history of neoliberal capitalism since Tiananmen and the end of the Cold War has clearly disavowed the coupling between democracy and capitalism, and questions if the latter is the precondition of the former.

To resurrect the lives mowed down by the tanks, we shall not merely condemn the Other, to dig a hole under our feet and find China. Rather, we should find in the glistening high-rises of our material civilization the barbarism its shiny steel and glass, its plasma screens, and I-pod-nano are meant to deflect and refract. “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism,” writes Walter Benjamin, “barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one to another” (256). For Benjamin, an ethical way of remembrance necessarily excludes the empathetic identification with the victor of history, for such identification will “invariably benefit the rulers” (Ibid). What we ought to bear in mind is the fact that the rulers of our time are becoming more and more alike though they may be geographically apart. Without full cognizance, we are perhaps ruled not only by those who govern us with the apparent freedom of the boundless market but we are becoming rulers of our own, unwittingly abiding with such normative liberty. The post-Tiananmen world is indeed one of liberty into which the multitude is thrown, competing against each other without crutch, without rudder, and without much purpose.

It is truly sad that few contemporary Chinese is aware of the anonymous young man standing against the tanks in Tiananmen Square two decades ago, as we try to commemorate him and the event today. Most Americans, if they remember, remember it in the isolation of a once shocking image now turned banal. We attribute the Chinese amnesia to suppression by its totalitarian state, and we are all too anxious to congratulate ourselves on the blissful forgetfulness of the Kent State. Evidently, I am not equating the degree and scope of such historical violence on different sides of the Pacific at different historical junctures, neither am I condoning the brutality of both governments. What I advocate simply is that we ground our thinking and feeling both within and beyond the nation at a time when capitalism has chained our humanity in an involuntary identity.

The oblivion of history is tied to the waning of utopian imaginations, and the vanishing of the man from collective memory is nothing but the triumph of the spirit of capitalism, whose perpetual renewal of fashion and commodities hinges on the constant “creative-destruction” (Schumpeter), not only of physical landscapes, and manufactured things, but the memory inherent in animal life that makes us less barbaric. In remembering, I hope, we are becoming more human.

## Works cited

Amin, Samir. Trans. Michael Wolfers. *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*. London: Zed Books, 1990.

Benjamin, Walter. Ed. with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt and Trans. by Harry Zohn. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper, 1950.

---

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 51](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).